

Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces: Communicating Harms and Challenging Perpetration

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Abbreviations

CS	Crimestoppers
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
SAT	Situational Action Theory
SH	Sexual Harassment
UoS	University of Suffolk
UK	United Kingdom
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

Methodological note

1802 people participated in the survey. For ethical reasons due to the strictly voluntary nature of the research, and the sensitive subject matter, none of the questions were mandatory. This means that respondent numbers per question are lower than overall participant numbers.

As is customary when analysing survey data, prevalence figures are based on **valid percentage**, where missing data (i.e. non-responses) are excluded from the calculations.

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We extend our particular thanks to Crimestoppers' Michelle Leahair and Rodger Holden for their time and contributions, including their sustained guidance and support over the course of the project, as well as to all Crimestoppers staff.

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Thanks to Emma Swan, whose supportive presence during discussion groups helped to create a safe space for participants to share their views and experiences.

Finally, we are hugely indebted to the more than 1800 individuals who took time to participate in the research, with particular thanks to the 20 interview and discussion group participants.

1.1 Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) is axiomatic to a culture of gendered violence and abuse, impacting women and girls' daily lives and limiting their ability to enjoy the rights and freedoms they should be able to take for granted (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012; Vera-Gray, 2018; APPG- UN Women, 2021). SH was first widely recognised as a social problem in the 1970s (Brownmiller, 2000), and would feature in a series of landmark US cases over the ensuing decades, including those of Carmita Wood, Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford (Heck, 2019). More recent events such as the ascendance of the #MeToo movement, and, in a UK context, the murders of Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard, Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry and Julia James have reignited societal conversations about gendered violence and women's right to feel safe in public (Stanley et al, 2021). With the rise of smart phone technology to document egregious instances of sexual harassment and gendered violence, combined with online platforms which allow women and girls to attest to their experiences, there has been a groundswell of academic and popular attention to this topic, both in the UK, and globally. Owing to developments in modern technology and changing attitudes and public discourses, there is now a sustained interest in this topic in many countries around the world, unlike past instances such as the aftermath of the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, where protests led to limited governmental or structural changes (Dutta & Sircar, 2013). Contrast this to the more recent *cause-célèbre* of the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer in London in 2021, which sparked an ongoing public conversation within the UK public and government. Finally, the steep rise of domestic abuse and femicides during the global pandemic lockdowns, such as the 2020 murder of Dr Lorena Quaranta in Sicily, Italy, led to increased focus on the quotidian violence faced by women and girls, often at the hands of their partners, spouses or other family members.

The findings presented in this report contribute to this wider conversation, drawing from a rich set of data gathered over the course of six months (between November 2021-April 2022). The overarching aim of the research is to enhance public understanding of SH and drive the conversation forward, cementing a shift from individualistic and victim-focused narratives ('What was she wearing?') to prosocial and evidence-informed messaging. Data collected includes an online survey completed by 1800 respondents across the UK, as well as in-depth interviews and discussion groups with 20 participants. Findings from the survey, interviews and discussion groups will inform a national campaign from Crimestoppers which will challenge perpetration and address barriers to/encourage reporting.

Given the gendered nature of SH, which is disproportionately perpetrated by men against women and girls, researchers anticipated that the survey would predominantly attract female participants, which proved to be the case. Researchers also conducted interviews with men and women who had completed the survey or been recruited via professional and community networks and convened three all-male discussion groups. Researchers decided to capture additional qualitative data to 'triangulate' or compare findings from multiple data sources, and to uncover a wider range of perspectives.

This research project was designed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Contribute to the evidence base regarding community knowledge and awareness of sexual harassment/unacceptable or harmful behaviours and practices in public spaces
2. Add to the understanding of why some men choose to engage in harmful or unacceptable behaviours such as sexual harassment in public spaces
3. Use these research insights to develop effective, targeted messaging for key groups and demographics, including perpetrators, bystanders and 'enablers'.

This study focused on the experiences and perspectives of UK residents regarding SH in public spaces. For the purposes of the research, a broad definition of public spaces encompassing streets, social venues (pubs, clubs, bars, restaurants, cinemas), public

transport, civic buildings, religious institutions and school/educational facilities was used.

While there is no universally agreed definition of SH, researchers have adopted an inclusive understanding of SH guided by the World Health Organisation's definition of sexual violence: "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (World Health Organisation, 2012: 2). This description may encompass a wide continuum of unwanted behaviours, including, but not limited to, unwelcome sexual comments, questions or sexual advances, unwanted touching, prolonged and intrusive staring or 'leering', indecent exposure or 'flashing' or pressure to engage in sexual activity (Thames Valley Police, 2022).

1.5 Research questions

- RQ1: How do men who engage in harassing, unacceptable and harmful behaviours in public spaces perceive their actions? (what about participants whose friends/acquaintances use these behaviours?) (e.g., definition, attitudes, emotional response, knowledge)
- RQ2: How do men more broadly perceive and experience sexual harassment and other forms of unacceptable and harmful behaviour in public spaces? (e.g. definition, attitudes, emotional response, knowledge)
- RQ3: How do women perceive and experience sexual harassment and other forms of unacceptable and harmful behaviour in public spaces? (e.g., definition, attitudes, emotional response, knowledge)
- RQ4: To what extent are demographic factors such as gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity and age linked to differing experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment and unacceptable/harmful behaviour in public spaces?
- RQ5: What explanatory or justificatory frameworks do perpetrators draw on to make sense of their actions?

- RQ6: What frameworks do people who witness, or are subjected to, harassment/unacceptable or harmful behaviours draw on?
- RQ7: How can researchers and campaigners use these insights to communicate with targeted groups? (e.g., perpetrators, bystanders)

1.6 Design, Methodology and Ethical Considerations

1.6.1 Design

The research was guided by core feminist and ethical research principles. Survey and discussion group/interview design, data collection and analysis were all designed to adhere to the methodological best practices established by specialist VAWG researchers, taking an approach that is highly “attentive to measurement and issues of ethics”, power and positionality (Leung et al, 2019: 435-6).

All data collection took place online, with one-to-one interviews and discussion groups being conducted via Teams or Zoom according to participant preference. Researchers chose to adopt this approach for methodological and pragmatic reasons, which enabled us to elicit views from a more nationally representative sample while limiting costs and mitigating the ongoing risk of disruption associated with the pandemic.

1.6.2 Methodology

Researchers employed complementary recruitment methods during different stages of the research. For the questionnaire stage, participants were self-selected, responding to a national online survey which was open to the public and promoted widely via researcher and advisory group professional and community networks. For the interview and discussion group stages of research, participants were selected through purposeful sampling to better understand the views and opinions of a range of different demographic groups. Researchers recruited a purposive sample of participants, including male, female, disabled and LGBT participants, and those from

a range of ethnic backgrounds. The sample was relatively diverse in terms of sex/gender, age, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and disability.

The survey consisted of 23, predominantly closed-ended, questions, which were designed to shed light on participants' experiences of SH - including victimisation, perpetration, reporting, and witnessing SH perpetrated against others, as well as their emotional and behavioural responses to victimisation. The survey included three optional open-ended questions; two at the beginning broadly correspond to RQs 2 and 3, designed to explore male and female participants' views on how SH is, or should be defined, and their beliefs and attitudes about SH as a social issue. The final question afforded participants the opportunity to share any further thoughts, including feedback about the survey or wider research project.

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and the concern that participants should feel heard and recognised, researchers decided to draw on techniques associated with Harding's (2006) biographical interviewing approach when gathering qualitative data via interviews and discussion groups. This approach promoted an organic and "thematic" mode of engagement, enabling researchers to remain attentive to topics and themes introduced by participants, rather than following a circumscribed series of interview questions or topic guide (Harding, 2006: 4) In consultation with advisory group members and Crimestoppers, researchers developed an expansive 'conceptual map' for interviews and group discussions. This map was designed to guide researchers and ensure that interviews or discussion groups covered similar terrain without shutting down new or unexpected avenues of discussion (Harding, 2006: 5). The key topics covered in both the interviews and discussion groups included:

- Definitions of SH
- Responding to SH (including barriers to reporting)
- Preventing SH
- Education and awareness of SH
- Differences and commonalities in how people experience SH
- Personal and group norms regarding SH

For each of these topic areas, researchers devised an indicative, but non-exhaustive, range of questions, with the understanding that each individual or group discussion may cover these same thematic regions via different paths.

Qualitative Survey Analysis

Researchers reviewed and analysed the responses to open-ended survey questions using data analysis software. When analysing the qualitative data, researchers adopted an 'inductive' or data-driven approach, generating codes in response to common, striking and/or potentially significant features of the text. Researchers then looked at how the codes created and applied during this process recurred and co-occurred across the dataset, with the aim of uncovering underlying patterns and themes in the responses, including areas of tension or contradiction.

Quantitative Survey Analysis

For the quantitative analyses, researchers carried out a variety of descriptive and inferential statistical tests. Firstly, the data was cleaned up, with missing data excluded, and some variables grouped into composites for ease of analysis. Following this, descriptive statistics were carried out: general frequency analyses on demographic variables, frequencies of items such as experiences, reasons for reporting, and impact on respondents. Similarly, the researchers carried out crosstabulations, which provided a breakdown of variables such as experiences or perpetration of harassment by perpetrator gender (see Table 6 or this breakdown).

In terms of inferential statistics, independent t-tests were chosen to explore any gender differences in reporting, experiences of harassment or experiences of perpetration. These tests were used due to the gender variable's dichotomous nature (Prefer to Self-Describe and Prefer Not to Say were excluded for this analysis due to the low response rates).

This report contains a top-level summary of the quantitative analysis that was conducted.

1.6.3 Ethics and Participant Wellbeing

This research was subject to a rigorous ethics process and was approved the University of Suffolk's Ethics Board, with considerations regarding participant wellbeing at the heart of the research. In particular, researchers aimed to safeguard participants from emotional harm by ensuring that interview and discussion group schedules did not invite disclosures regarding personal experiences of victimisation. An Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) was present during each discussion groups and was available post-discussion as a source of confidential support if participants were adversely emotionally affected by participation.

Both principal researchers are experienced in researching sensitive research topics and themes. Despite the research not asking participants about their personal experiences around perpetration or victimisation, there were some participants who chose to reveal their own experiences. Abiding by the process of honest and methodologically thorough research, interviewers did not terminate such discussions, and to facilitate candid and free flowing dialogue, participants were allowed to talk about such matters, and offered additional support after conclusion of the interviews to promote their wellbeing. Participants were each given a pseudonym, corresponding with their gender, so that the anonymity of participants would be maintained when the research was written up.

2. Key Findings

2.1 Survey Participant overview

Descriptive analysis of survey findings suggests a clear gender asymmetry among participants, with 84.7% (n = 661) of participants identifying themselves as female, while just 12.7% (n = 99) reported that they were male (see Figure 2). As discussed in the introduction, this is likely to reflect the greater salience of the survey topic for women.

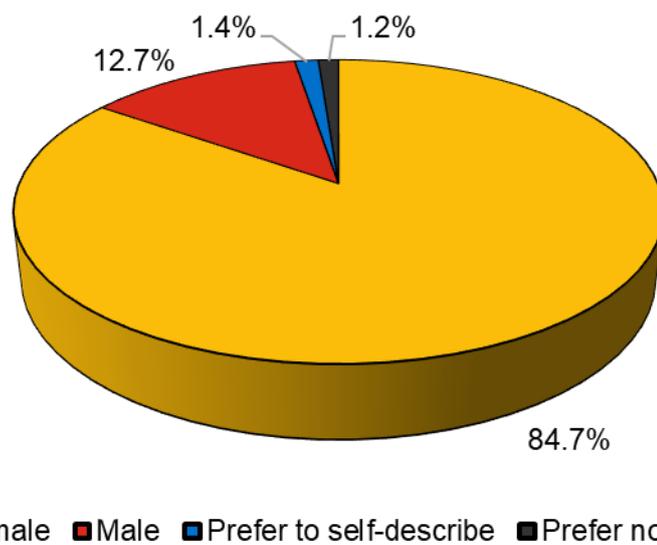


Figure 1: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'What is your sex/gender'? (n = 780)

Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants were aged between 25 – 64 years, with just 8.1% (n = 65) in the youngest age bracket of 18-24 years, and only 12.7% aged 65 or above (n = 102).

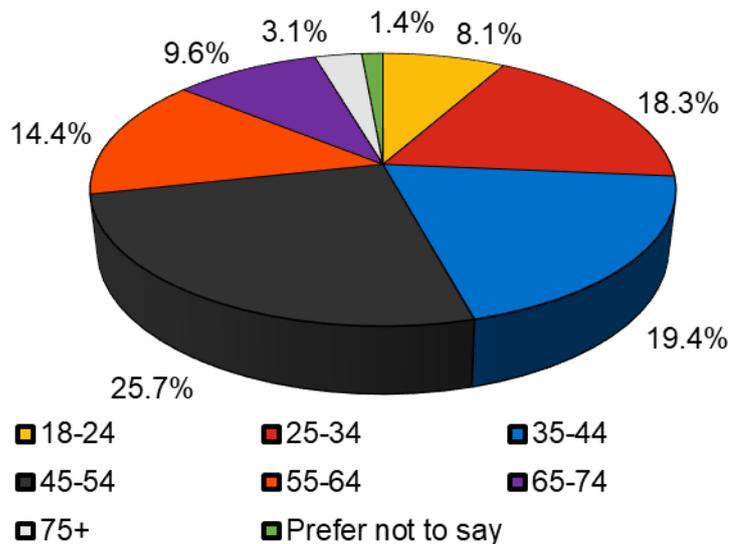


Figure 2: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'How old are you?' (n = 803)

Figure 3 shows that more than 90.8% (n = 728) of participants came from White British, White Irish, or Other White backgrounds, indicating that Black and Asian individuals were underrepresented among the sample relative to the UK population as a whole (Black and Asian people comprise respectively 3.3% and 7.5% of the UK population, Office for National Statistics, 2020). This means that the survey findings may offer limited insight regarding the experiences of women and girls from minoritised backgrounds, who prior research has found face intersecting forms of violence (Crenshaw, 1995).

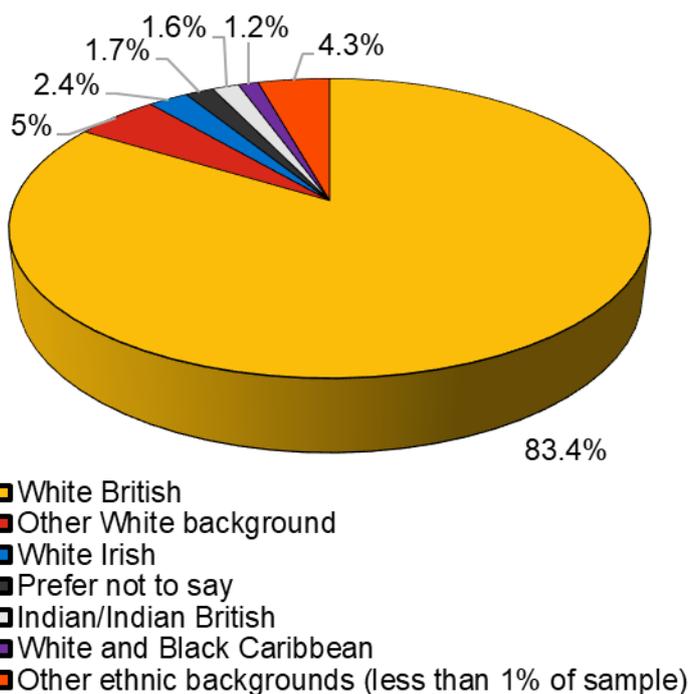


Figure 3: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'What is your ethnicity?' (n = 802)

In contrast to the underrepresentation of racially minoritised individuals in the participants in this research, LGBTQ+ participants were overrepresented relative to the wider UK population where they comprise 2.7% (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This may reflect the fact that, like women, LGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately subject to SH (LGBT Foundation, 2020), which would explain a greater willingness to engage with the research. Figure 4 shows that 18.2% (n = 145) of our participants identified with sexual orientations other than heterosexual/straight.

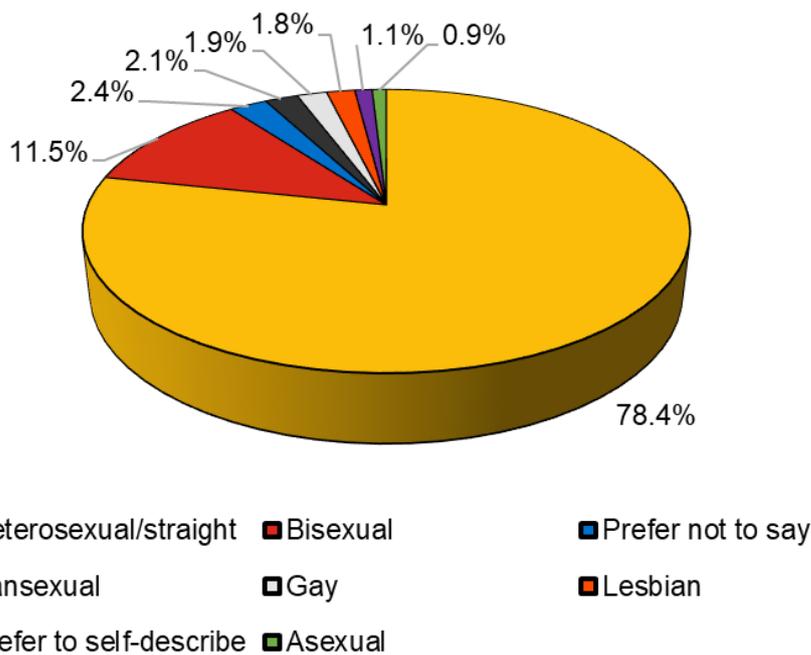


Figure 4: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'What is your sexual orientation?' (n = 800)

Around one in six (15.6%) of participants considered themselves to be disabled (n = 125). This is an underrepresentation of disabled people relative to the general UK population, where around one in five adults (22%) is disabled (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021).

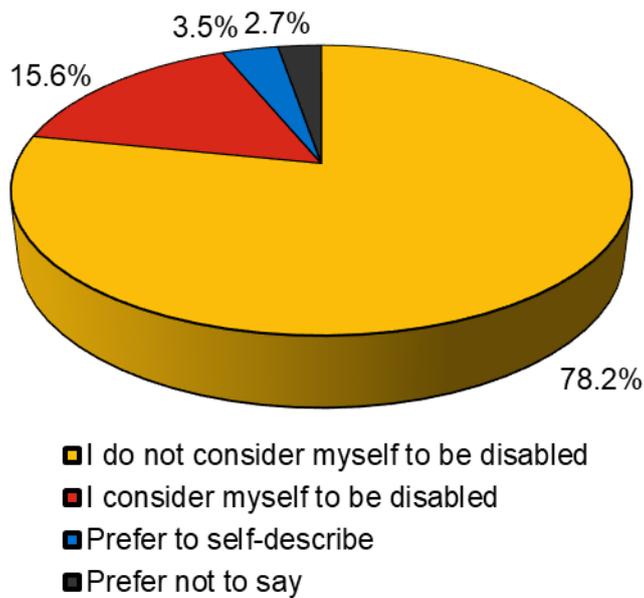


Figure 5: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'Do you consider yourself to be disabled?' (n = 801)

Around two-thirds (68.7%) of participants considered themselves to be a victim or survivor of SH (n = 549). This finding could reflect the self-selection of survey participants; people with lived experience of a phenomenon may be more likely to take part in research that is relevant to their experiences. However, this figure closely corresponds to findings from prior research employing probability sampling, which found that 68% of UK women had experienced SH at some point since the age of 15 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012).

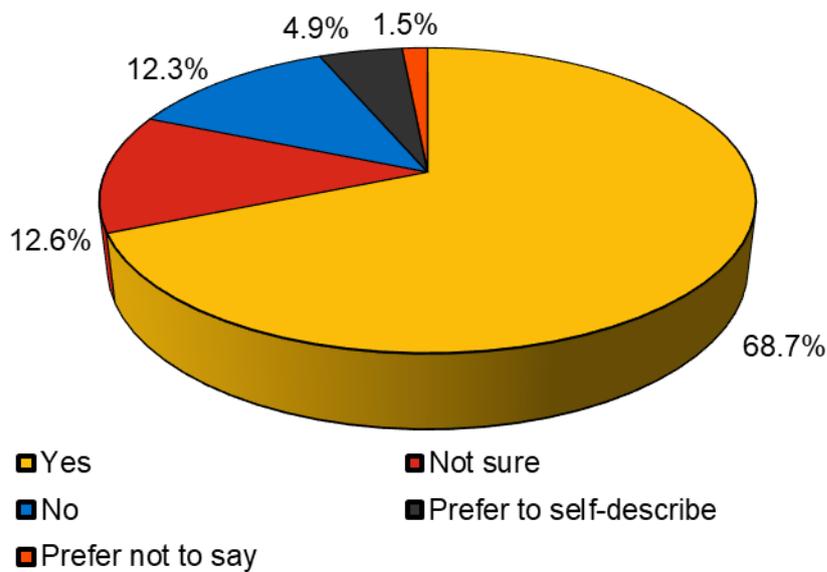


Figure 6: Breakdown of survey participants' responses to 'Do you consider yourself to be a victim/survivor of sexual harassment?' (n = 799)

2.2 Survey findings

2.2.1 Defining Sexual Harassment

Analysis of open-ended survey responses identified several clear themes in relation to how participants define and understand SH, and their views on its impacts and harmfulness

Among the 1219 participants who responded to the question 'What do you think sexual harassment is?', responses clustered around a coherent set of key words or concepts (pictured in figure 8).

flirting, jokes, innuendos or explicit sexual references, comments on the recipient's body or appearance, inappropriate questions, sexual advances, catcalling and whistling. Physical forms of SH including **unwanted touching** (369) and **flashing** (17) also featured across a significant number of responses, while a number of participants specifically cited **non-verbal** behaviours such **staring** (38) or making obscene **gestures** (31). While the survey was designed to investigate SH in *physical* public spaces, multiple participants also alluded to inappropriate digital **messages and communications** (16).

As this overview suggests, the majority of responses either explicitly referenced or implicitly encompass **non-criminalised behaviours** (747), including unwanted verbal approaches, intrusive staring or “leering at body parts”, catcalling and whistling. These findings suggest that most participants regard a wide continuum of unwanted behaviours as plausibly constituting harassment in at least some contexts or circumstances and recognise that even ‘milder’ behaviours may cause offence, embarrassment, distress or alarm in the recipient. The negative emotional valence of the words used to characterise SH by the majority of participants – **uncomfortable, intimidating and threatening** – indicates that for most participants SH is understood as affectively unpleasant; at best discomforting and at worst actively frightening. Importantly, this sense of fear was not limited to interactions that were overtly hostile or threatening; as one survey participant noted (see Figure 8) the fear of escalation can imbue outwardly flirtatious or ‘complimentary’ interactions with a sense of menace.

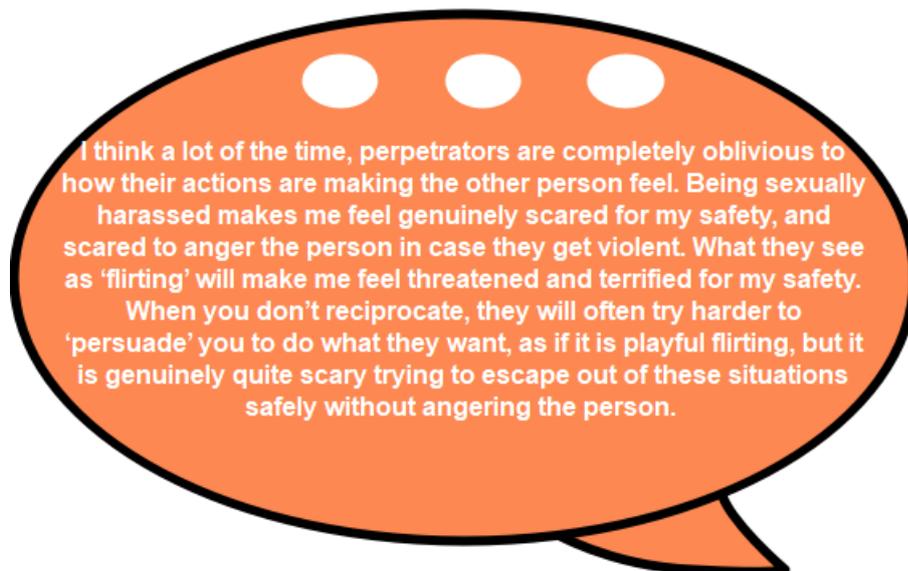


Figure 8: Excerpt from Participant 415's response to 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

The underlying threat of sexual and physical violence, and the implied need to carefully 'manage' the perpetrator's emotions and behaviours to prevent escalation, may account for demographic differences in the perception of non-contact behaviours such as wolf whistling (particularly observed in the discussion groups, as further discussed in Section 2.3).

The selected responses shown in Figure 9 highlight the references to a lack of mutuality and social appropriateness – **unwanted, inappropriate, non-consensual** and **unsolicited** – which suggests that most participants regard SH as a breach of accepted personal and social boundaries.

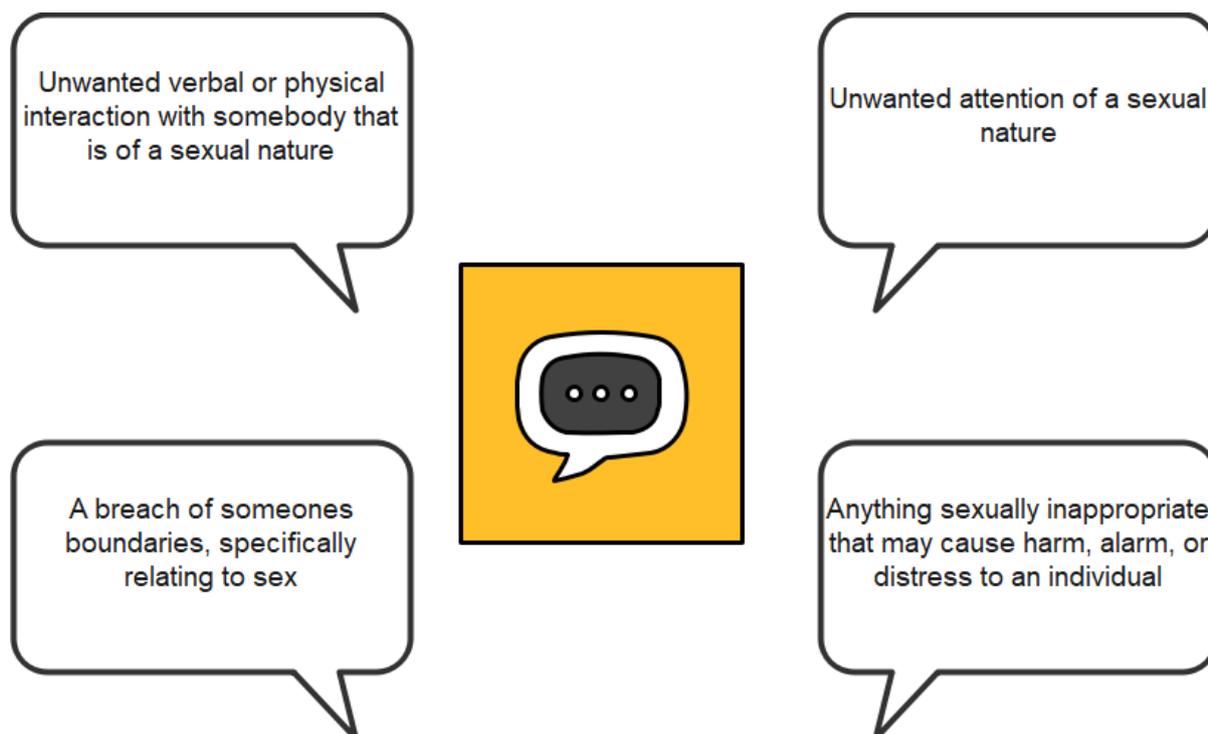


Figure 9: Selected responses to the survey question, *What do you think sexual harassment is?*

2.2.2 Sex/gender and scale of victimisation

As Figures 10 and 11 demonstrate, female participants were more likely than male participants to report having experienced each form of unwanted behaviour included in question 4 ('Roughly how often in your life have you experienced unwanted sexual behaviours or interactions in a public space?')

Female survey participants reported encountering a wide spectrum of unwanted and intrusive behaviours in public spaces, including people standing too close (96.3%), questions about their sex life or relationships (78.1%), staring (66.9%), comments on their appearance (66.4%), whistling (44.2%), unwanted touching (43.8%), unwanted kissing (34.7%), indecent exposure (23.5%), having pictures taken of them (23.1%) and being sent unsolicited nudes or sexual images (21.1%). A significant minority of female participants also reported experiencing rape (10.9%), while 23.2% reported that they had been 'forced to have sex'².

² Researchers included this more neutral and behaviourally descriptive term in order to pick up on participants whose experiences meet the legal definition of rape but who may not recognise or wish to characterize their experiences as such.

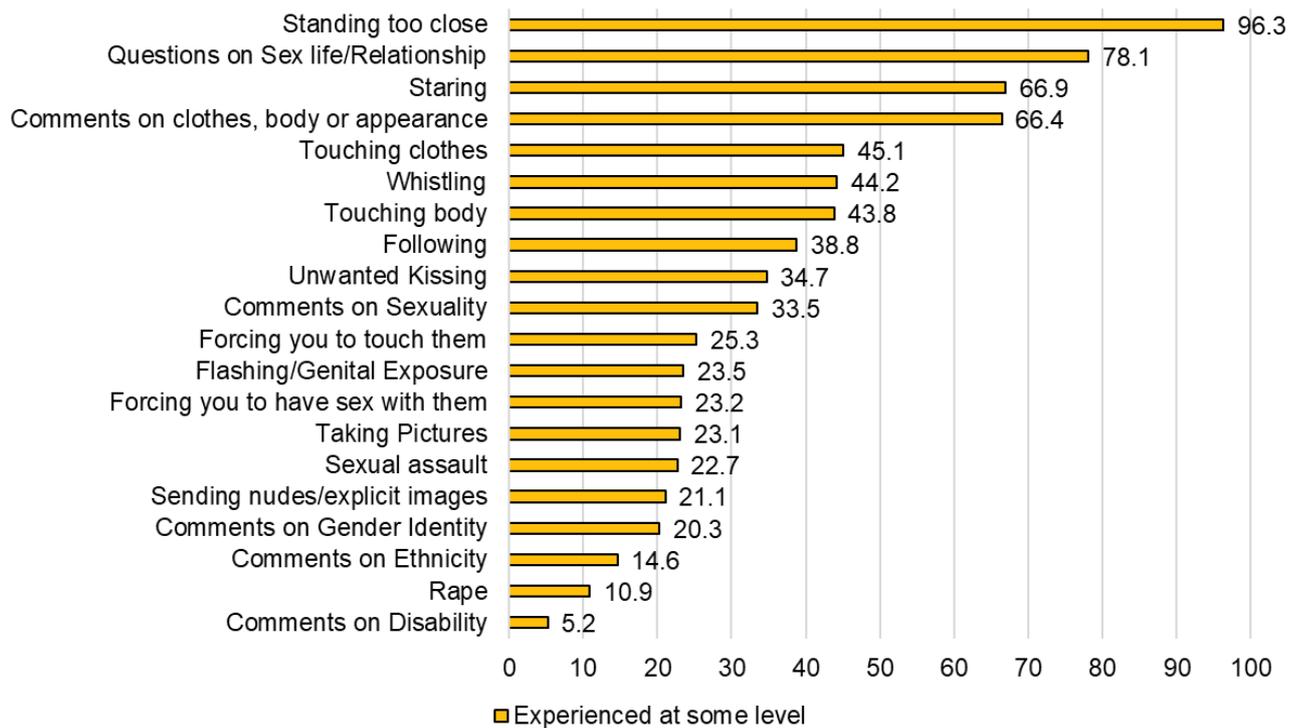


Figure 10: Lifetime prevalence of unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces: **female participants**

Across male and female participants, there was some overlap in terms of the most commonly experienced forms of unwanted behaviour encountered in public spaces, with a proportion of male as well as female participants reporting questions on their sex life or relationship (10.1%), staring (5.6%) and comments on their clothes, body or appearance (5.5%). Like female participants, male participants were more likely to report being ‘forced to have sex’ (1.4%) than being raped (0.5%)

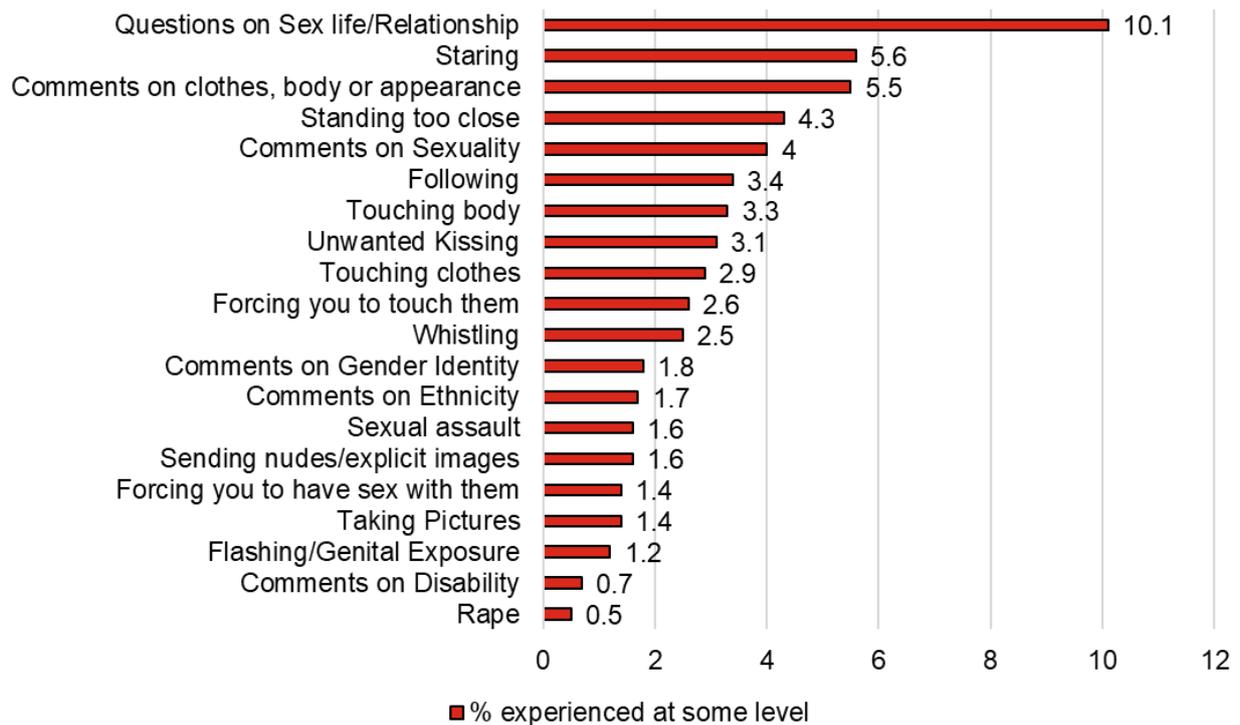


Figure 11: Lifetime prevalence of unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces: **male participants**

These quantitative findings on the prevalence and gendered nature of SH were reflected and reinforced by the open-ended responses, which positioned SH as a significant, and gendered, issue.

1176 participants responded to question 3 ('Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'). A majority of respondents felt that SH continues to pose a **significant problem** in the UK (679), with 18 participants likening it to an **epidemic**.



Figure 12: Excerpt from Participant 153's response to the survey question 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

79 responses alluded to SH in public spaces as a **gendered problem** which disproportionately (although not exclusively) impacts women and girls. 28 participants specifically noted that SH particularly affects **younger women and girls** (see Figure 13 below for selected responses highlighting this pattern), with several experiencing SH during childhood or in a school setting. This finding is also borne out in the quantitative responses discussed in the next section.

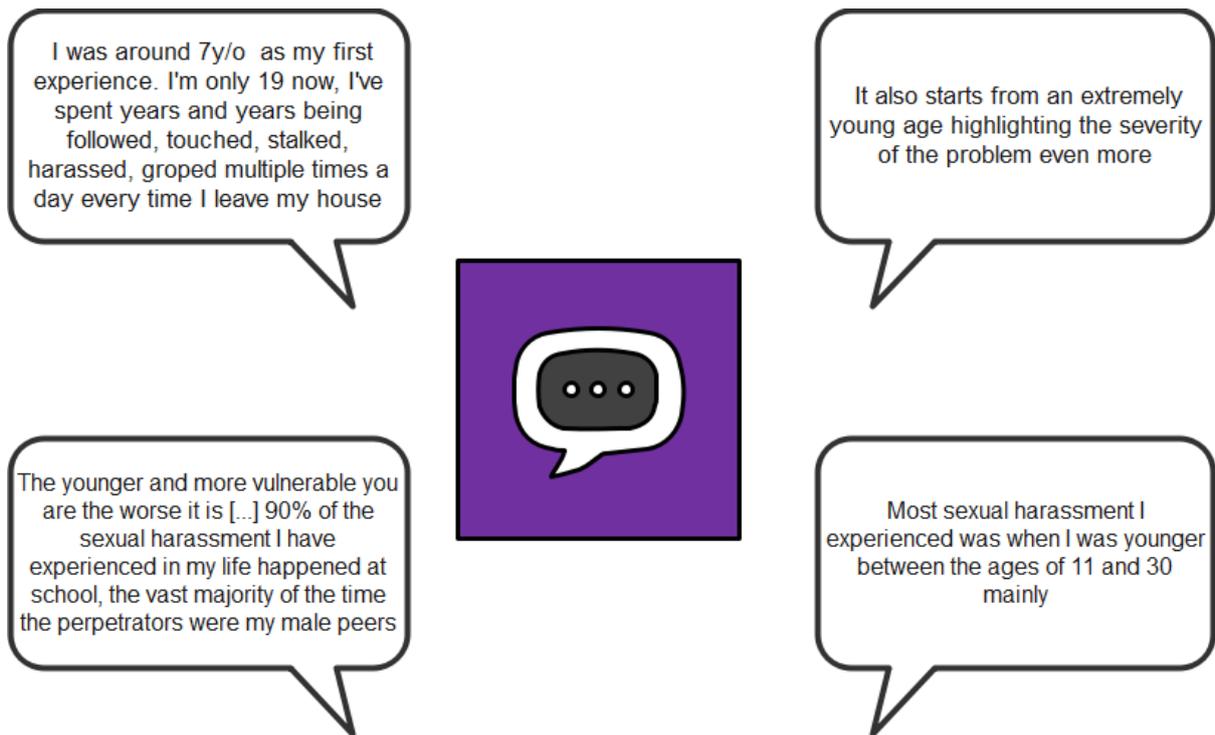


Figure 13: Selected responses to the survey question 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

Notably, not all participants felt that SH represents a significant concern in the UK. A small proportion of participants (43 individuals, or 3.6% of participants) identified SH as a **minor or insignificant problem**, with several of these respondents rejecting what they saw as a troubling **definitional overreach** in evolving understandings of SH such as the definition provided by the World Health Organisation.

While this constituted a very minor theme in the survey findings, researchers have detailed these responses in depth because they speak to central research questions regarding the beliefs, attitudes and social norms people invoke when **minimising and normalising SH** in public spaces and point to how messaging can be developed to combat these.

Several felt that including milder and non-contact behaviours diluted the definition of SH and conflated nuisance (or even flattering) behaviours such as wolf whistling with harmful ones such as unwanted touching.

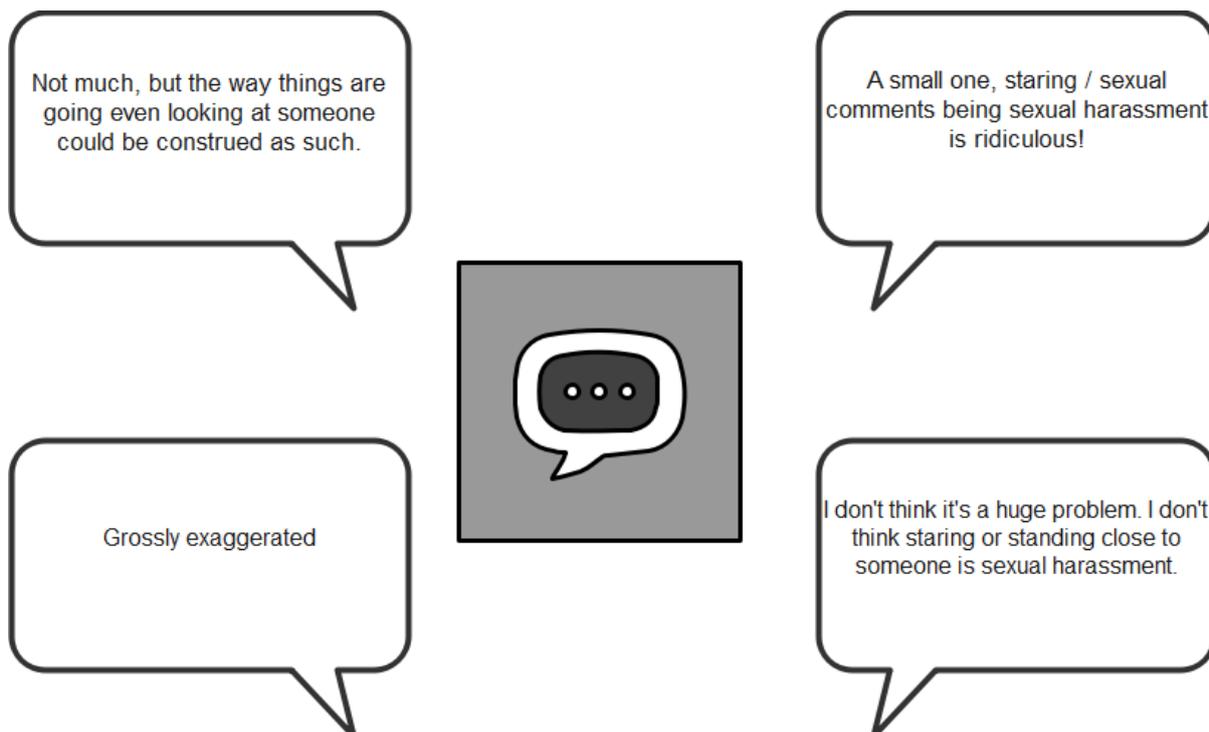


Figure 14: Selected responses to the survey question 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

This theme was also present in responses to question 23 ('If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share, you can share them here').

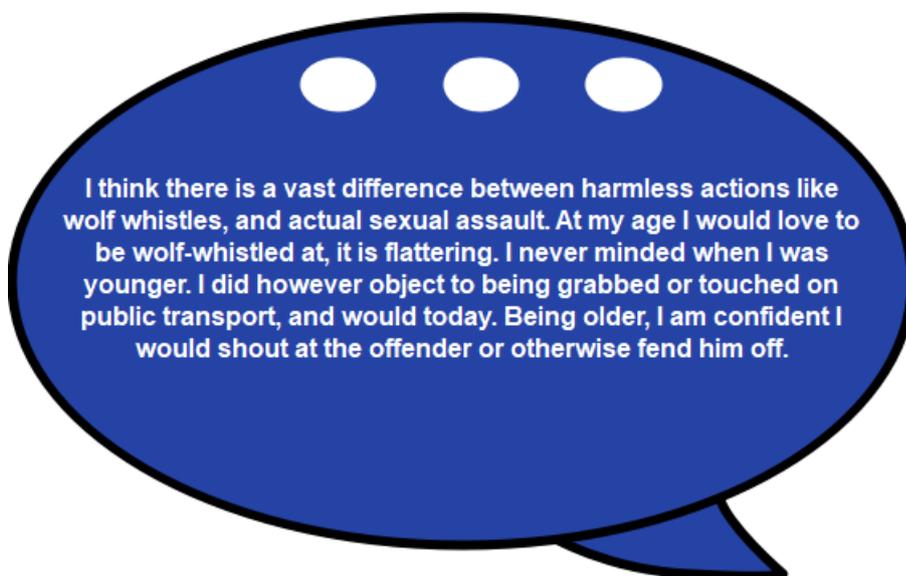


Figure 15: Excerpt from Participant 28's response to the survey question 'If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share, you can share them here'

Some participants rejected what they saw as a censorious 'PC'- or media-driven pathologisation of normal social interactions, which they felt could interfere with the formation of romantic and sexual relationships:

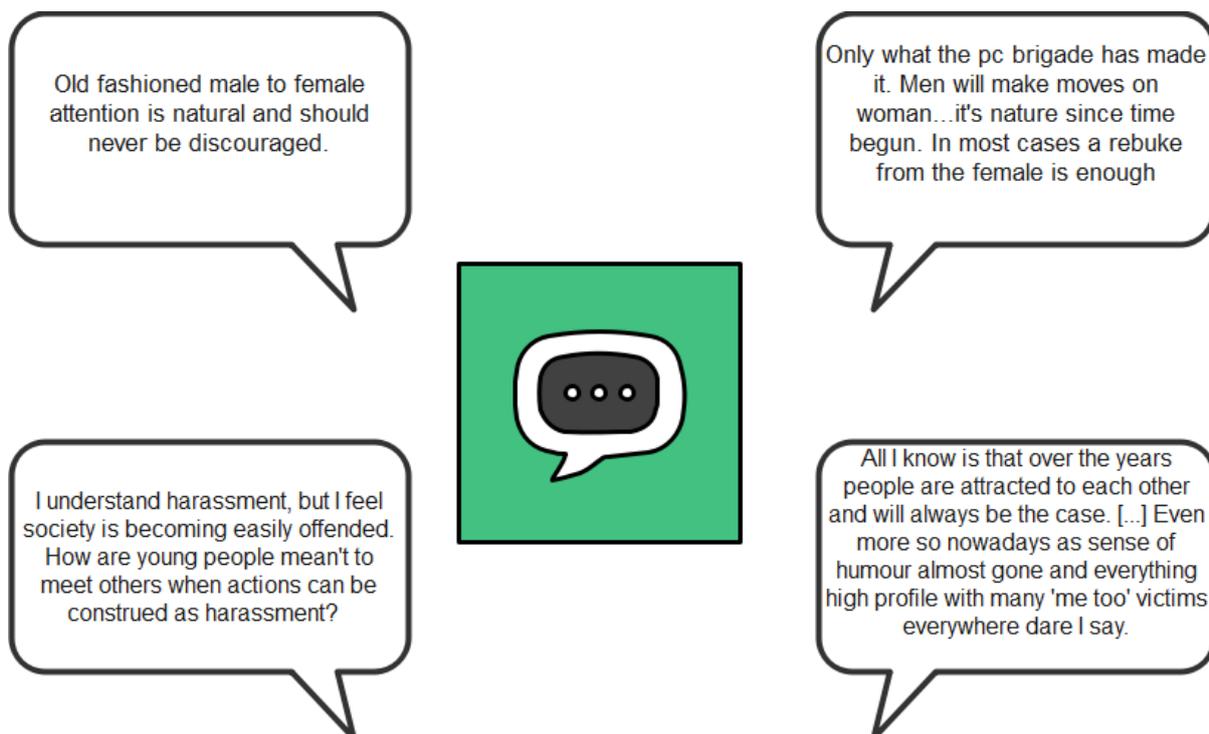


Figure 16: Selected text excerpts from four participants referring to a disruption of 'natural' social interactions

While critiques regarding overly broad or subjective definitions of SH were a minor theme in the survey, this concern emerged more prominently during online discussion groups with male participants, with some participants voicing concerns about the workability and fairness of emergent definitions (see, also, section 2.3.1).

2.2.2 First experience

The responses to question 11 ('Thinking back to your answers to the previous questions, roughly how old were you when you first experienced unwanted sexual behaviours or interactions in a public space?') show that the majority of participants were first subject to unwanted behaviours from early puberty to their mid-teens, with the highest subset of participants first encountering unwanted sexual behaviours between the ages of **14-16 (30.9%)**. Almost the same percentage (**29.4%**) first experienced unwanted behaviours between **11-13** years. Around one in six participants' (**16.8%**) first experience occurred when they were aged **10 or younger** (3.7% aged 0-5, 13.1% aged 6-10). These findings, combined with the more in-depth qualitative data from the open-ended survey responses and interviews, demonstrate

that the majority of those who experience SH encounter it for the first time during **adolescence or childhood**.

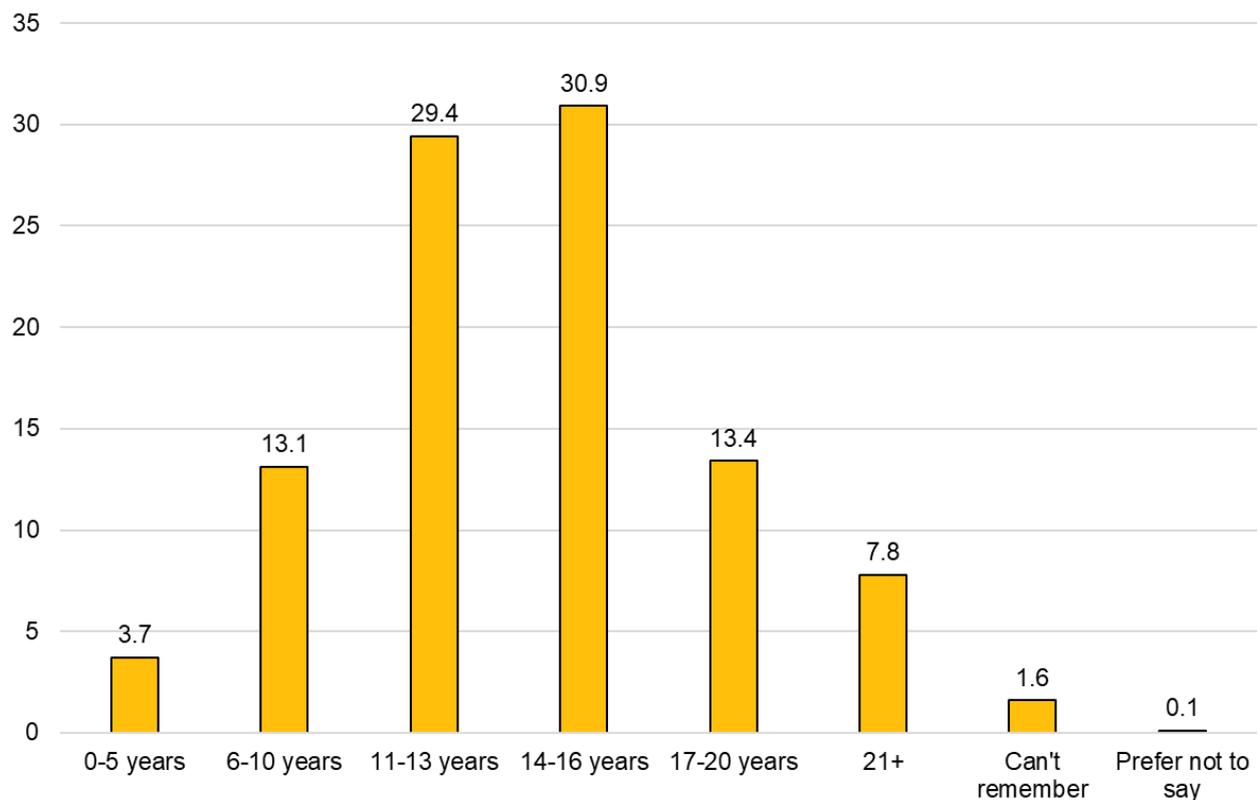


Figure 17: Age at first experience of unwanted sexual behaviours or interactions in public spaces

Although this research did not specifically focus on CSA, the results are nevertheless alarming both for the early age of first experiences of SH by young women and girls, and the additional forms of criminality that the perpetrators of these behaviours are involved in, by implication.

2.2.2 Perpetrators

The highest proportion of participants reported experiencing unwanted sexual behaviours from a stranger (23.7%), followed by an acquaintance (12.7%), colleague (10.9%), classmate (7.1%) or friend (7%). This suggests that, while most forms of gendered violence are disproportionately perpetrated by intimate partners or family members (e.g. rape, CSA, intimate partner abuse, 'honour' based violence), SH in public spaces is often enacted by those outside of, or at the periphery of, women's social orbit. 'Myth busting' discourses about gendered violence which focus on the (relatively) low risk of "stranger danger" should therefore be framed with care to ensure

that women’s very real experiences (and rational fears) regarding stranger-perpetrated SH are not minimised or characterised as illogical or overstated (Roberts et al, 2022: 288).

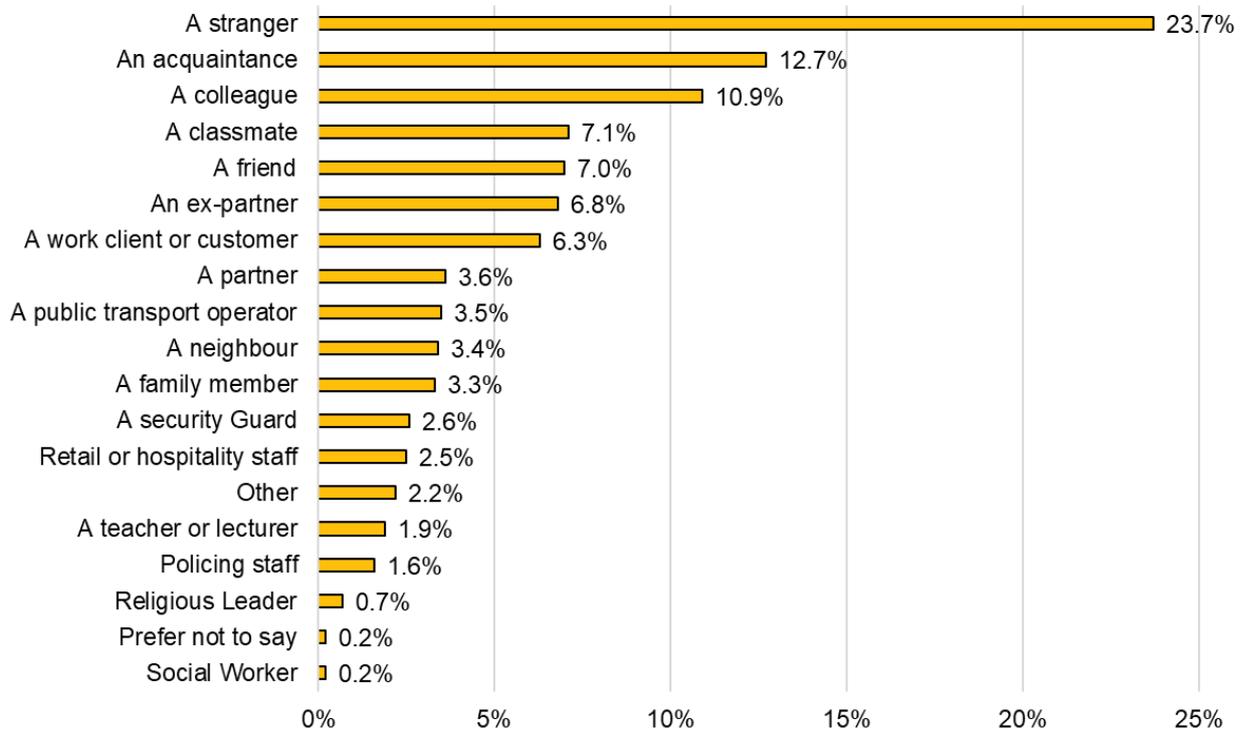


Figure 17: Responses to question 6 ‘Who was the person or people who carried out these unwanted sexual behaviours or interactions in public spaces (please tick all that apply)?’

In relation to the sex/gender of the perpetrator, frequency analyses show that **behaviours from men were by far the likeliest to be reported of all perpetrator genders**. The highest reported behaviours from men were unwanted staring, where only 8.19% of respondents indicated they have never experienced this behaviour from men. Another highly reported behaviour was whistling, where just 10.27% of respondents indicated they had never experienced this behaviour from men. The lowest reported behaviour from men was comments on the respondent’s disability – 92.15% of respondents indicated they had never experienced this behaviour. However, this was generally a very low-reported behaviour across gender.

Women perpetrators’ behaviours were second most reported. However, reporting was still very low, with the highest reported behaviour being comments on appearance, in which 40.32% of respondents suggesting they had never experienced this behaviour. The lowest reported behaviour from women was rape, at 97.41% never experienced.

Mixed gender groups had a very low reporting rate. The highest reported behaviour from mixed-gender groups was staring, with 52.13% of respondents having never experienced this from this demographic. For most behaviours, over 90% reported never experienced, with the lowest reported behaviour being rape, with 98.15% of the sample having never experienced this behaviour from this demographic.

The demographic with the lowest reporting rate was Non-Binary or Agender perpetrators. Similarly, to mixed-gender groups, most of the behaviours indicated an over 90% 'never experienced' report. The highest reported behaviour was staring – 81.76% reported they had never experienced this behaviour from this group before. The lowest reported behaviour was rape – 98.66% of the sample indicated that they had no experience of this behaviour from non-binary/agender perpetrators.

Overall, from this data it is indicated that **unwanted behaviours from women, non-binary and agender, and mixed-gender perpetrators appear much less prevalent than those from men**. Some behaviours seem uncommon across the board – such as rape or comments on the respondent's disability, and others are more common across the board, such as unwanted staring. Differences in perpetrator gender still exist in reporting in these behaviours, however.

2.2.3 Unsafe spaces

Participants reported encountering unwanted sexual behaviours across a variety of public spaces. In keeping with the wider body of research on SH (see Gekoski et al, 2015; Universities UK, 2016; Ofsted, 2021; Quigg & Bigland, 2020), night-time economy (NTE), public transport and educational settings emerged as frequent contexts, in addition to commercial and residential areas.

As Figure 18 demonstrates, almost one in four participants (23.4%) had experienced unwanted behaviours in a NTE setting such as a pub (12.2%) or nightclub (11.2%). 21.3% of participants reported encountering unwanted behaviours on public transport such as buses (6.6%), trains (12.3%), and taxis/Ubbers or equivalent (2.4%) Street-based harassment was also common, with just over one in five (21.9%) encountering

unwanted sexual behaviours in high streets (11.9%) or in a residential area (10%). 6.2% of participants reported having experienced unwanted behaviours in school, college or university contexts.

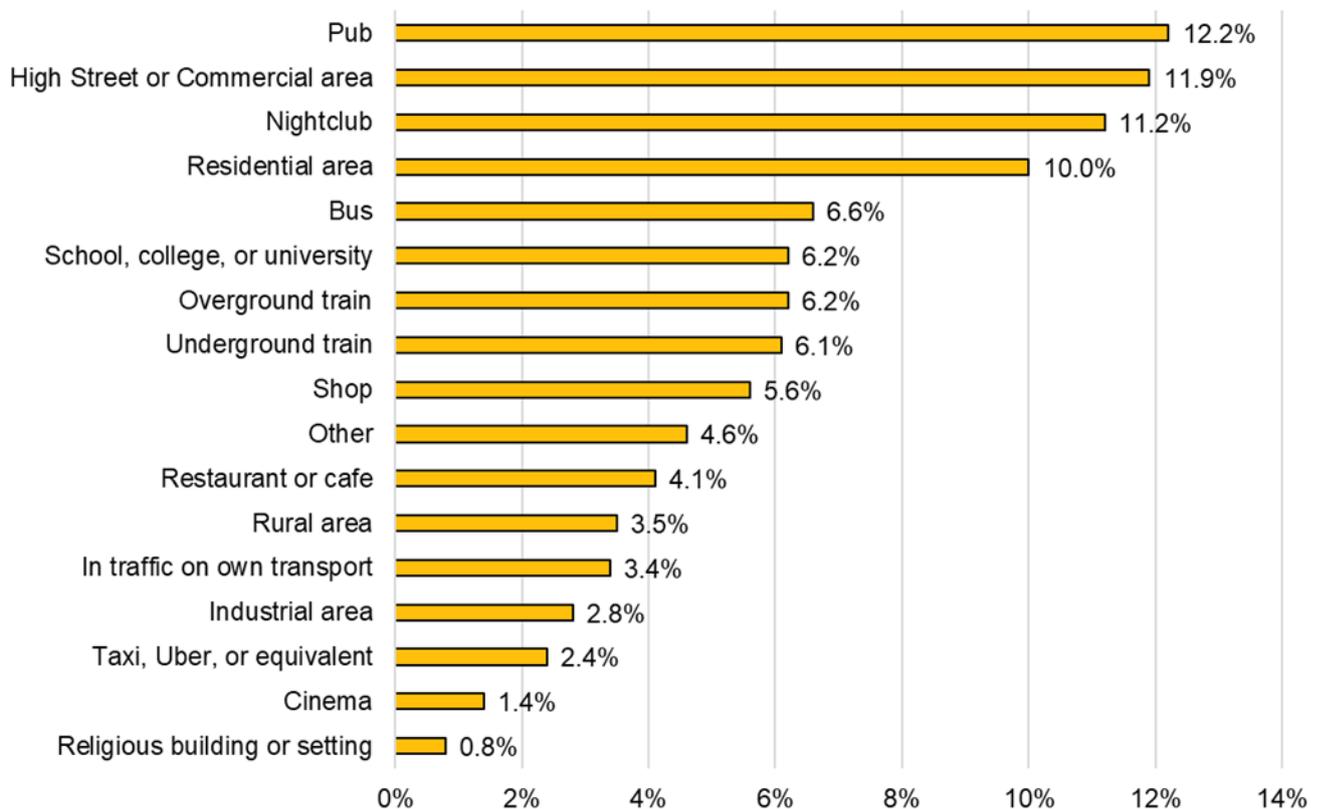


Figure 18: Responses to question 5 'Thinking back to your answers to the previous questions, where did these unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces happen (please tick all that apply)?'

2.2.4 Impacts

Participants reported a range of emotional and behavioural impacts associated with the experience or anticipation of SH.

As Figure 19 indicates, participants predominantly reported experiencing negative emotions in response to their most recent encounter with SH: anger was the most commonly reported response (10.3%), followed by feeling vulnerable (9.5%), upset (8.4%), frightened (8.2%) anxious (7.7%) or self-conscious (7.5%).

Less than 2% of participants reported feeling flattered (0.9%), attractive (0.4%) or desired (0.4%) as a result of their most recent experience, which underlines that SH was not received or experienced as complimentary by the overwhelming majority of participants.

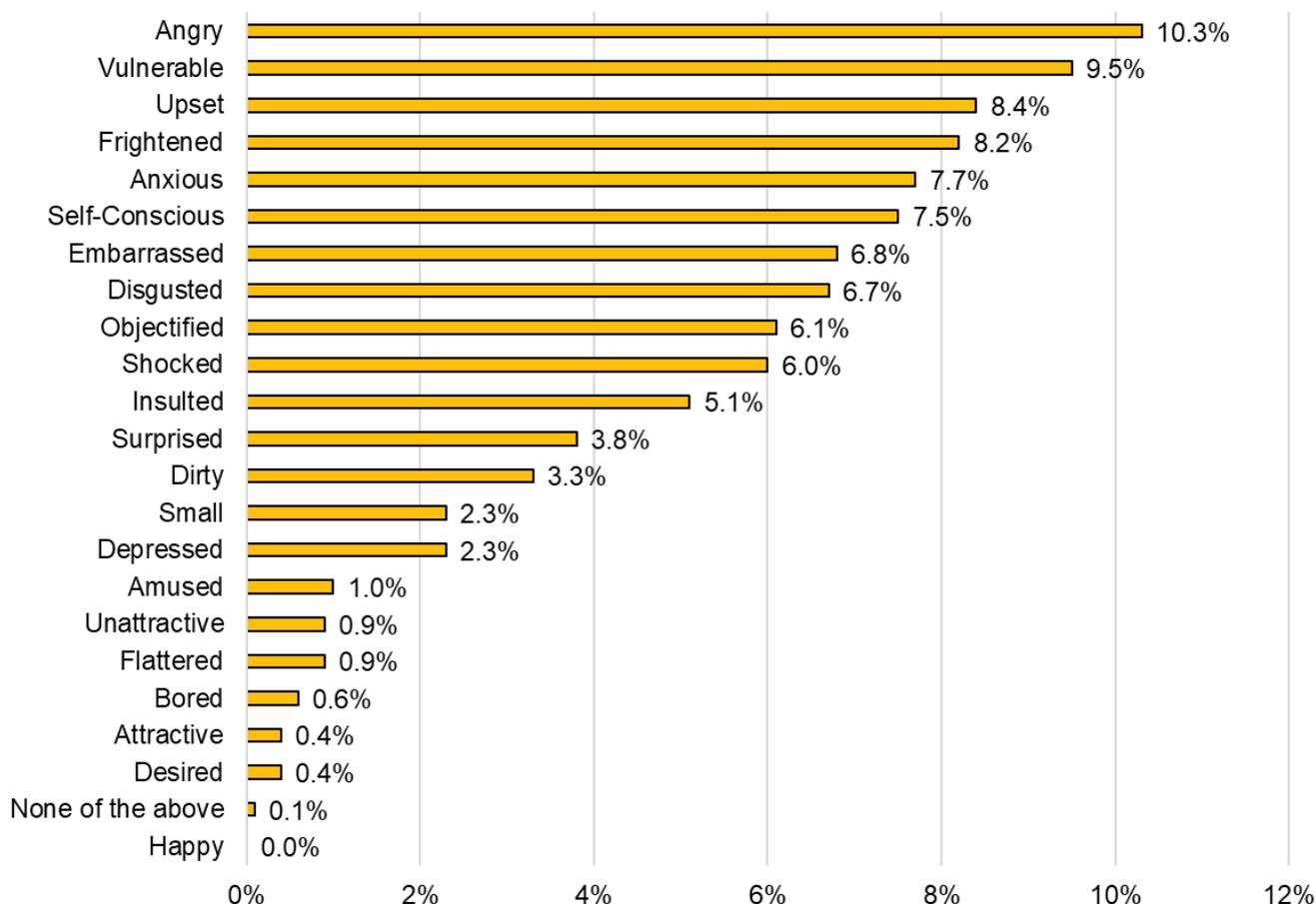


Figure 19: Responses to question 9 'Thinking back to the most recent occasion when you encountered an unwanted sexual behaviour or interaction in a public space, how did this make you feel (tick all that apply)?'

Participants reported modifying their daily activities in a range of ways to avoid victimisation, including **avoiding isolated areas (14.6%)**, avoiding **going out late or in the dark (12.2%)**, and **asking someone to accompany them (11.1%)**. Around one in ten (**9.8%**) reported **avoiding places where they had previously encountered unwanted sexual behaviours**. This finding extends the literature on the impacts of SH, which suggests that women habitually alter, and restrict, their activities to evade unwanted behaviours, exchanging freedom for safety (Vera-Gray, 2018). This is an important finding because it demonstrates the tangible harms of SH, with ostensibly 'minor' intrusions in public spaces cumulatively working to reduce women's ability to move and live freely.

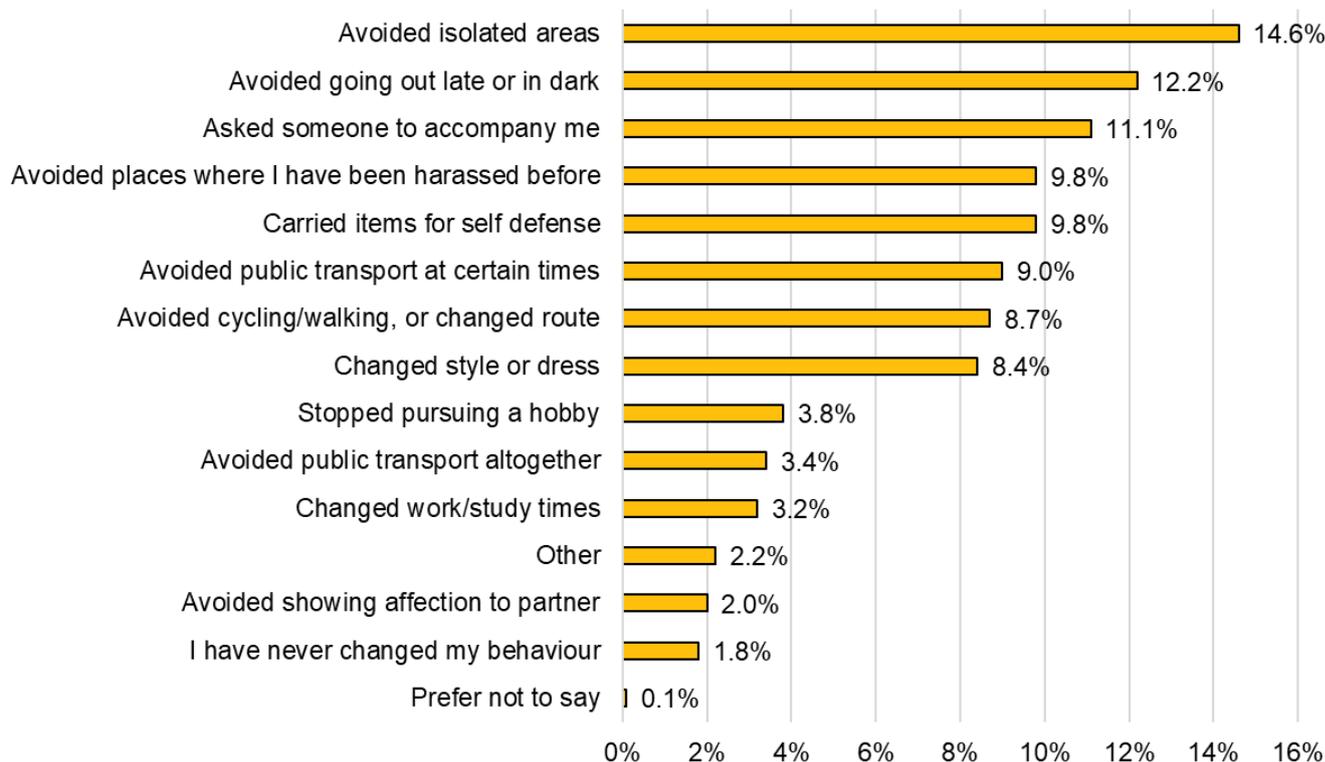


Figure 20: Responses to question 8 'Thinking about how you use public spaces, have you changed your behaviour in any of the following ways to feel safe (please tick all that apply)?'

These quantitative findings are reflected, and enriched, by the open-ended survey responses, where several participants emphasised the **everydayness** of SH in public spaces (25). These participants expressed frustration at the ubiquity of SH and the accompanying expectation that women should 'stay safe' by altering their behaviour.

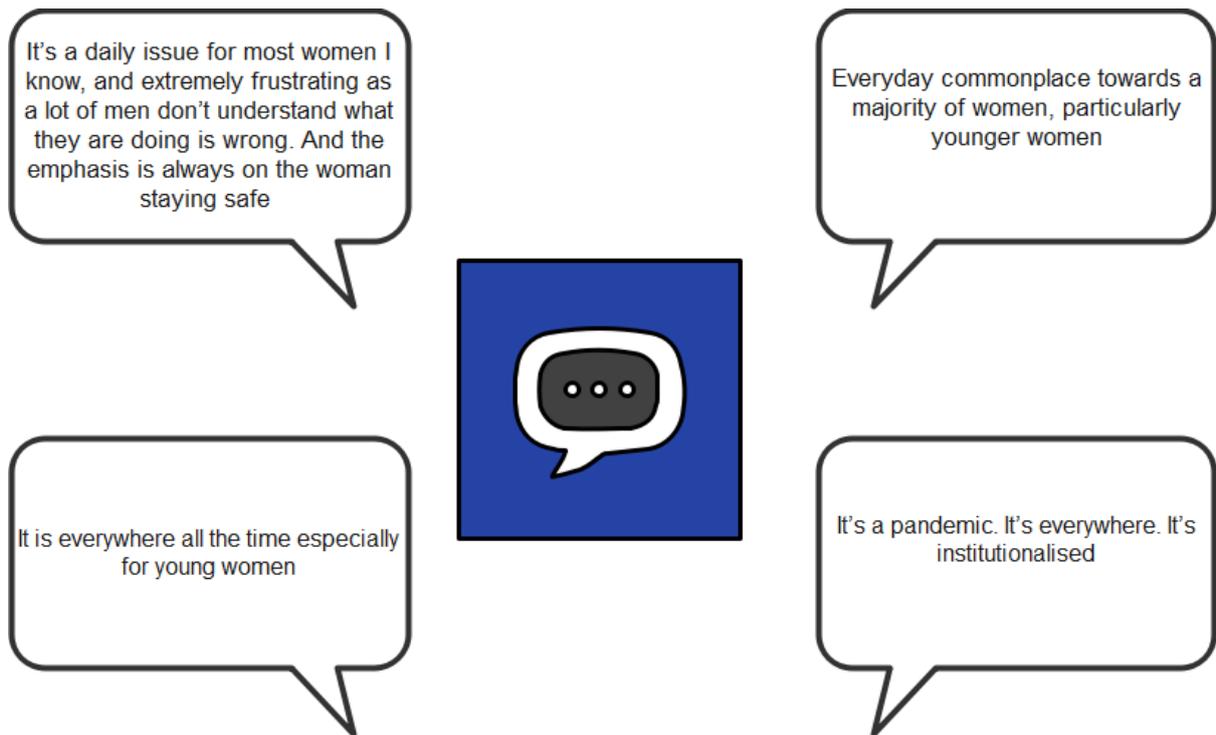


Figure 21: Selected responses to the survey question 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

16 participants described the impact that SH has had on their lives, with one participant evoking a sense of daily anxiety and constraint in vivid terms:

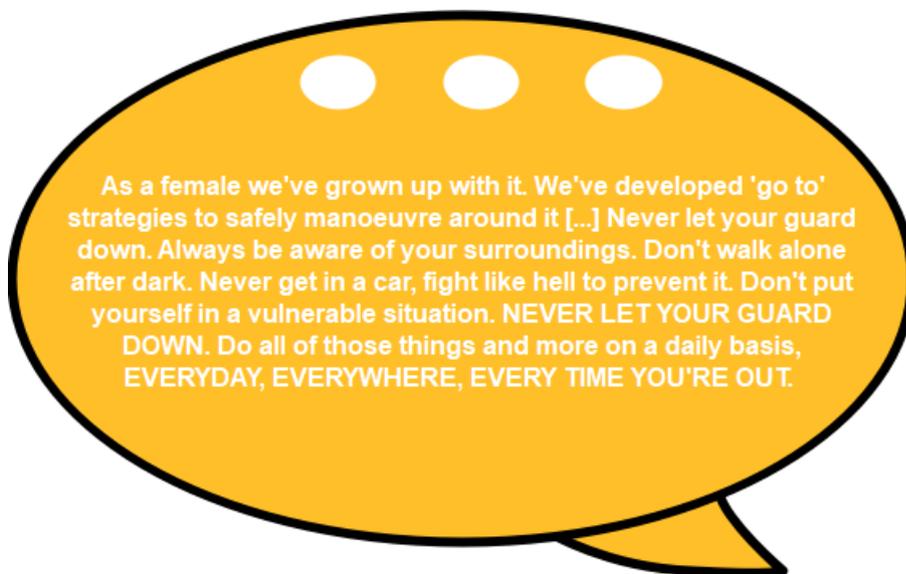


Figure 22: Excerpt from Participant 210's response to the survey question 'Based on [the World Health Organisation SH] definition, how much of a problem do you think sexual harassment is in the UK?'

These responses align with wider research findings regarding 'safety work'; the habitual, unpaid and typically invisible labour women and girls undertake in order to avoid sexual violence (Vera-Gray, 2018). It also points to the cumulative impacts of even mild and 'one off' incidents. Both these themes also strongly emerged during the depth interviews with female and male participants.

2.2.4 Cultural and generational differences

In addition to the striking findings regarding the gendered nature of SH, a subset of survey participants felt that there was a link between the perpetration – and tolerance – of unwanted sexual behaviours in public spaces and differing national and cultural (n = 18) or generational (n = 11) norms.

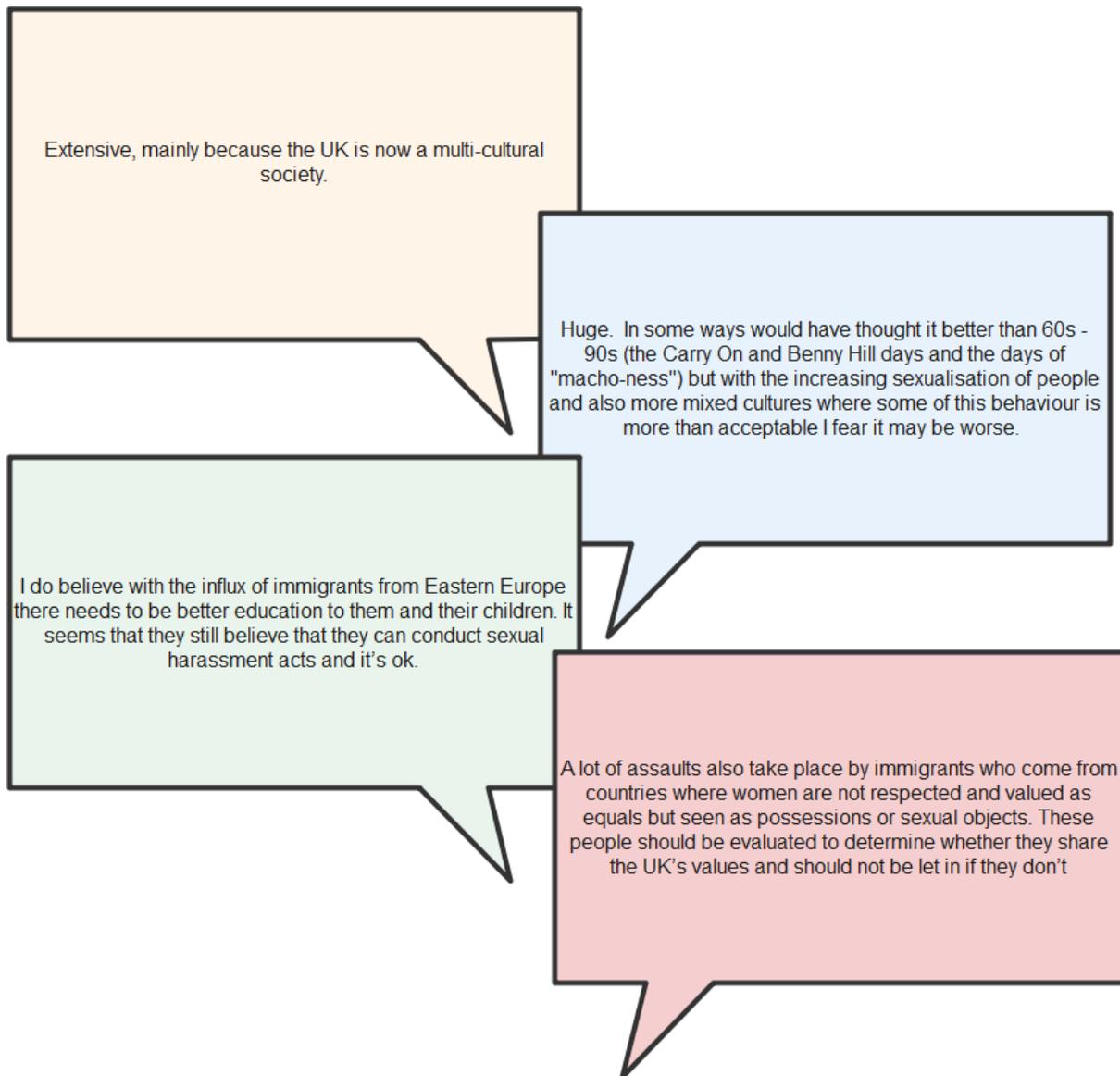


Figure 23: Selected excerpts from open-ended survey responses coded as relating to cross-national and cross-cultural differences

There is a methodological point to be made on these responses (above) before moving on to the more substantive point: respondents to this research were predominantly White British, in line with the UK population. Of these White British respondents, the majority did not refer to issues around culture, race or immigration when discussing SH. However, of the minority who did, the views on this topic were particularly vociferous and emotive.

Further, these responses chime with popular discourses regarding SH and other forms of sexual violence which invoke a racialised or migrant 'Other' as the perpetrator, and form part of a wider political instrumentalisation of gendered violence (see Cockbain & Tufa, 2020; Calderaro, 2022). Such narratives are doubly counter-productive to

policy and practice discussions about preventing VAWG; first because they act to disavow or delimit SH and other forms of gendered violence, characterising them as demographically bounded behaviours perpetrated by a culturally static and ‘unBritish’ minority. Secondly, they make it more difficult for migrant and minoritised victim-survivors of gendered violence to report and access support, further reducing their space for action (see Adisa et al, 2022; Thiara, 2015)³. Indeed, there is a growing body of academic literature to support the view that gendered violence (or SH in this case) being seen as racialised makes minoritised victims less likely to report due to biased responses from mainstream services and not wanting to feed into stereotyping

Other participants felt that entrenched attitudes among older generations contributed to cultural inertia regarding SH, and a lack of political will to achieve systemic changes:

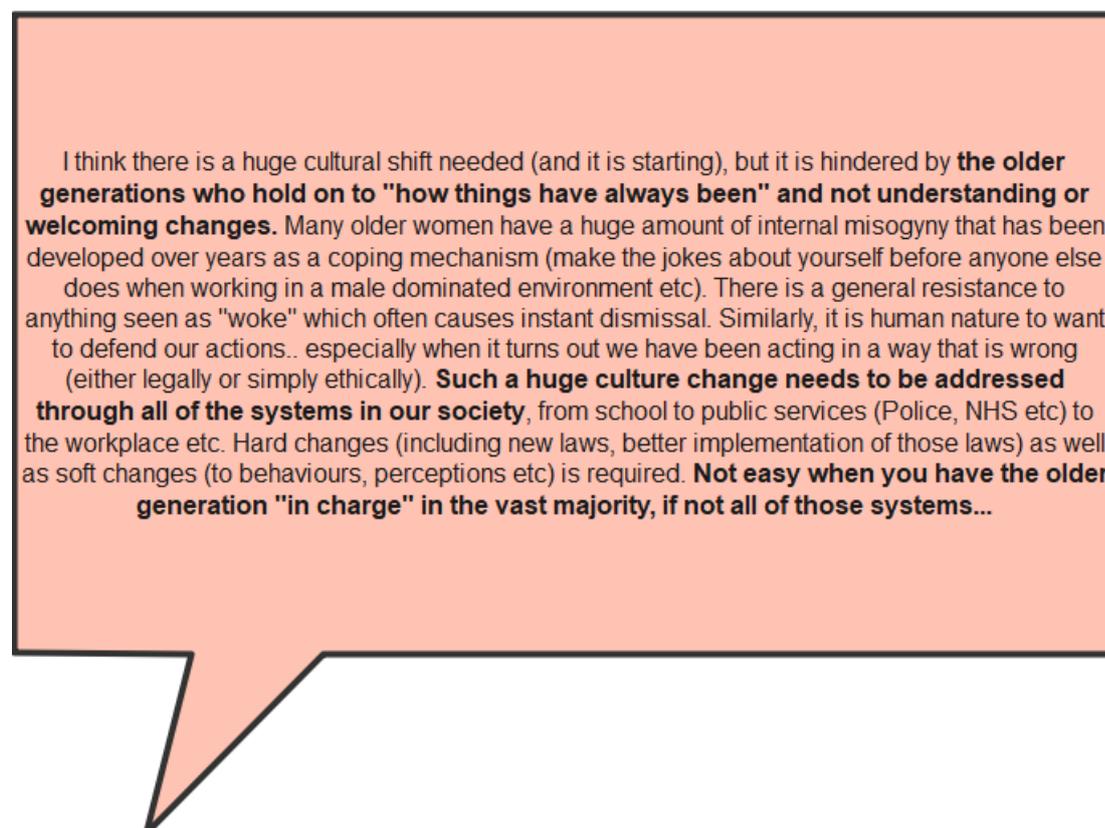
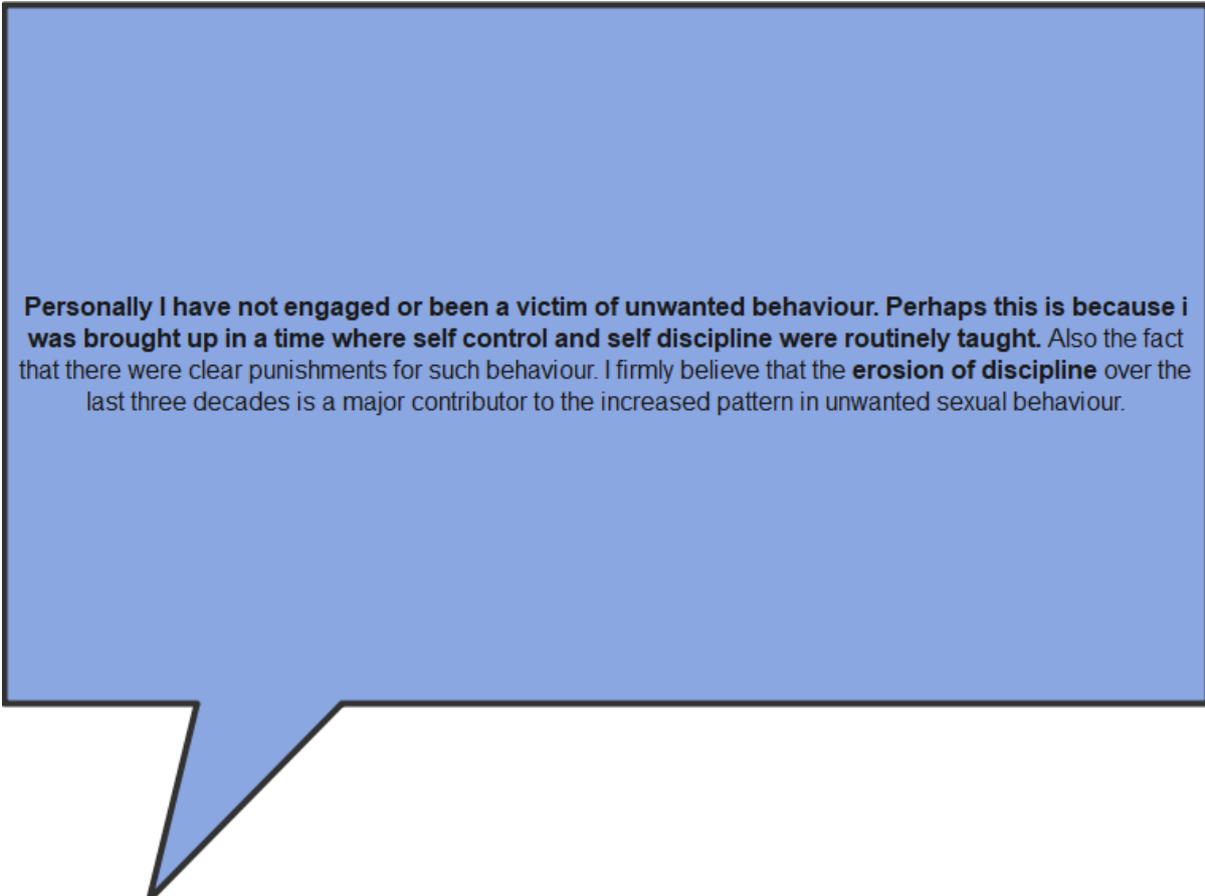


Figure 24: Excerpt from Participant 558's response to the survey question 'If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share, you can share them here.'

³ This is not to deny the existence of cultural differences which may impact attitudes towards SH: as one interviewee, 'Akeem' noted, contextual and (sub-)cultural norms can shape how people define, perceive and respond to SH (further discussed in section 2.3.4)

In contrast, another participant felt that SH was a problem associated with younger generations, and a progressive “erosion of discipline”.



Personally I have not engaged or been a victim of unwanted behaviour. Perhaps this is because i was brought up in a time where self control and self discipline were routinely taught. Also the fact that there were clear punishments for such behaviour. I firmly believe that the **erosion of discipline** over the last three decades is a major contributor to the increased pattern in unwanted sexual behaviour.

Figure 25: Excerpt from Participant 1089’s response to the survey question ‘If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share, you can share them here’.

These findings regarding – perceived and actual – differences in cultural and generational attitudes towards SH are important when tailoring messages to different groups. The wider literature provides some support for the view that older people (Klettke et al, 2016) and those who subscribe to ‘traditional’ gender roles across demographic groups are in general more likely to endorse rape myths (Hill & Marshall, 2018) and less likely to view victims as credible (Klettke et al, 2016). These findings are relevant when promoting reporting and working to prevent SH as effective bystander responses are grounded in an accurate and empathetic understanding of SV (see Fenton & Mott, 2018). This means that messaging tailored for these groups may need to debunk these myths to effectively communicate key points regarding the harmfulness and unacceptability of SH. Equally, however, the sense of SH as an issue that ‘belongs’ to a particular, problematic group or demographic can be counter-

productive, and care should be taken in messaging to avoid reinforcing the perception that SH is perpetrated by an 'Other' and is therefore not relevant to an audience member's own experiences or behaviours.

2.2.5 Key messages

Both the areas of widespread agreement among participants, and the areas of dissent, point to key messages that could be used to communicate why SH, even in its 'milder' iterations, is harmful and contravenes women and girls' right to safely access public spaces:

- Fear of escalation
- Everyday worry that limits access to public spaces
- Accretion and interaction of apparently minor and 'one off' incidents
- Disproportionately happens to younger women and girls, often perpetrated by adult and older men
- Targeted 'myth busting' when tailoring messaging to audience members with more traditional gender norms

These messages disrupt the assumption of a clear and objective hierarchy of harmfulness, where one can draw a bright line between 'nuisance' behaviours such as catcalling, jokes, innuendos and unwanted compliments, and deleterious ones such as unwanted touching, flashing and stalking. Instead, they suggest that instances of SH make up, and are experienced as part of, a wider continuum of gendered violence and discrimination rather than as discrete and clearly-boundaried acts. A whistle or flirtatious comment from a stranger can only be classified as 'harmless' in retrospect; in the moment the recipient may fear escalation to sexual assault or physical harm.

Moreover, the everydayness of SH means that 'minor' impacts add up: one catcall may be annoying, while the fifth catcall that day (or fifteenth that week) may contribute to someone feeling scrutinised, humiliated and unsafe in public spaces, and lead them to modify their behaviour in major ways.

Finally, a powerful counter to the view that anti-SH messaging will interfere with 'normal' and mutualistic social interactions is the finding (supported by both quantitative and qualitative survey responses, as well as the interviews with female participants) that many women's experiences of SH peak during late childhood or puberty and are often perpetrated by adult men.

2.3 Interview and discussion groups

Researchers conducted semi-structured online interviews with seven participants and received written responses to the interview questions from one participant.

Researchers facilitated three online discussion groups with a total of 12 male participants.

2.3.1 Participants overview

The sample included two male participants and six female participants, and included interviewees who identified themselves as (amongst other sexualities) gay, heterosexual and bisexual. Regarding socioeconomic status, the sample reflected a range of experiences, from those who were struggling financially to those who were financially comfortable. One participant considered themselves to be disabled. Participants came from British Pakistani, White European, White British, and undisclosed ethnic backgrounds. Participant ages ranged from 18-24 to 75+.

Discussion group participants were aged between their early 20s to late 50s, and came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including White British, Black British and Asian British participants. As with the interviews, researchers adopted a purposeful sampling approach to hear from a wider range of participants. Hearing from male participants was deemed to be particularly important given the research focus on understanding men's beliefs and attitudes regarding perpetration and using this

understanding to challenge SH, encourage reporting and empower bystanders more effectively.

As anticipated during research design, no interviewees or discussion group participants reported (intentionally) perpetrating SH. However, several described witnessing incidents of SH or possible SH perpetrated against others or expressed concerns that they may have inadvertently overstepped people's boundaries in the past in relation to less physically invasive behaviours such as staring or flirting. Equally several participants described witnessing SH perpetrated against others and provided accounts of how they understood and responded to these experiences. These accounts go some way to illuminating the underlying frameworks through which people categorise and make sense of SH and point to gaps and inaccuracies in these frameworks which can be targeted to provide effective messaging.

2.3.2 Defining Sexual Harassment

Key findings from the interviews align with, and reinforce, the trends identified in open-ended survey responses.

As with the definitions of SH provided by survey participants, interviewees' and discussion group participants' understanding of SH centred on a fairly consistent cluster of key terms and concepts.

SH was widely characterised as **uncomfortable** (31), **non-consensual** (24) and **unwanted** (20 occurrences), involving unwanted **sexual attention** (15) and behaviours such as leering, inappropriate comments or touching.

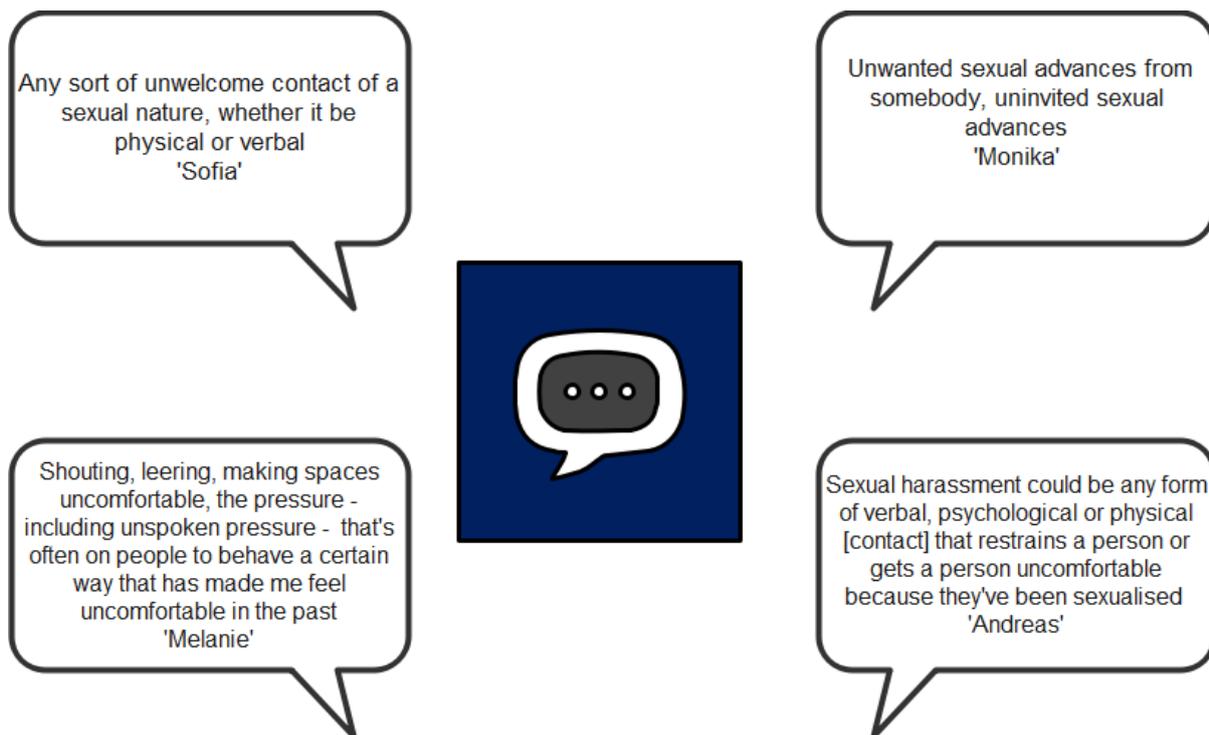


Figure 26: Interviewees' definitions of SH

Female and male interviewees shared similar perspectives on how SH should be defined. While discussion group participants offered comparable definitions, there was more debate regarding the legal and practical implications of classifying 'milder' behaviours such as whistling or staring as SH, evoking some survey participants' concerns about **definitional dilution or overreach**. Equally, some participants were hesitant regarding the subjective nature of SH, where the same behaviour can be regarded as either complimentary or intimidating based on the reaction of the recipient.

The following exchange between two discussion group participants illustrates some of these complexities:

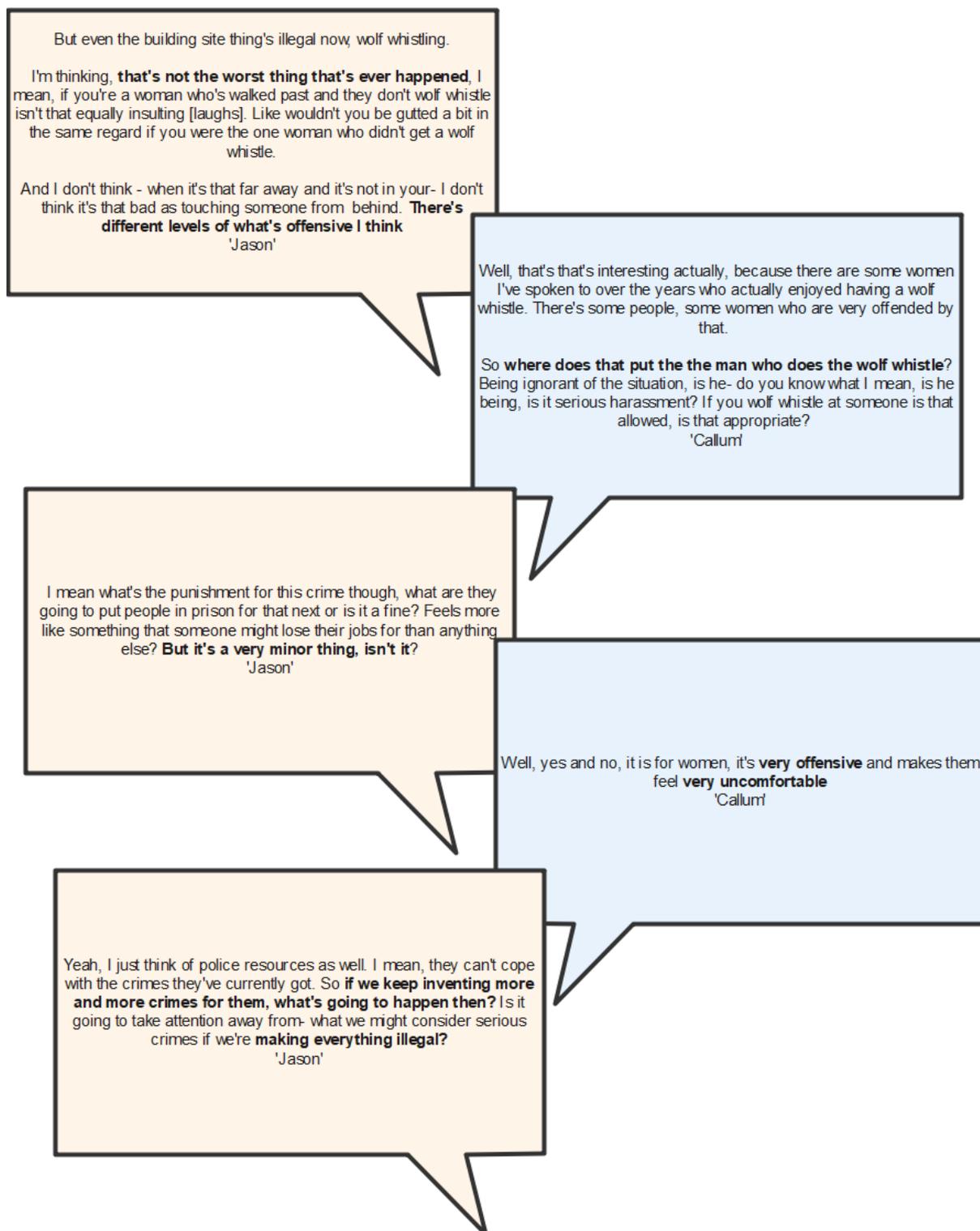


Figure 27: Excerpt from discussion group: 1

This discussion about the propriety and enforceability of more inclusive definitions of SH speaks to wider concerns about **policing the private**, which commonly arise in public discussions of gendered violence and abuse. These concerns are particularly

intense in relation to sexual violence, which often turns on questions of consent, context and intentionality, rather than behaviours which can be straightforwardly classified as either always appropriate or always inappropriate. In the absence of a decisive threshold of acceptability, some participants were wary of putting more encompassing definitions of SH on an 'official' (and particularly legal) footing, on the grounds that they could risk false positives or prove too difficult to police fairly.

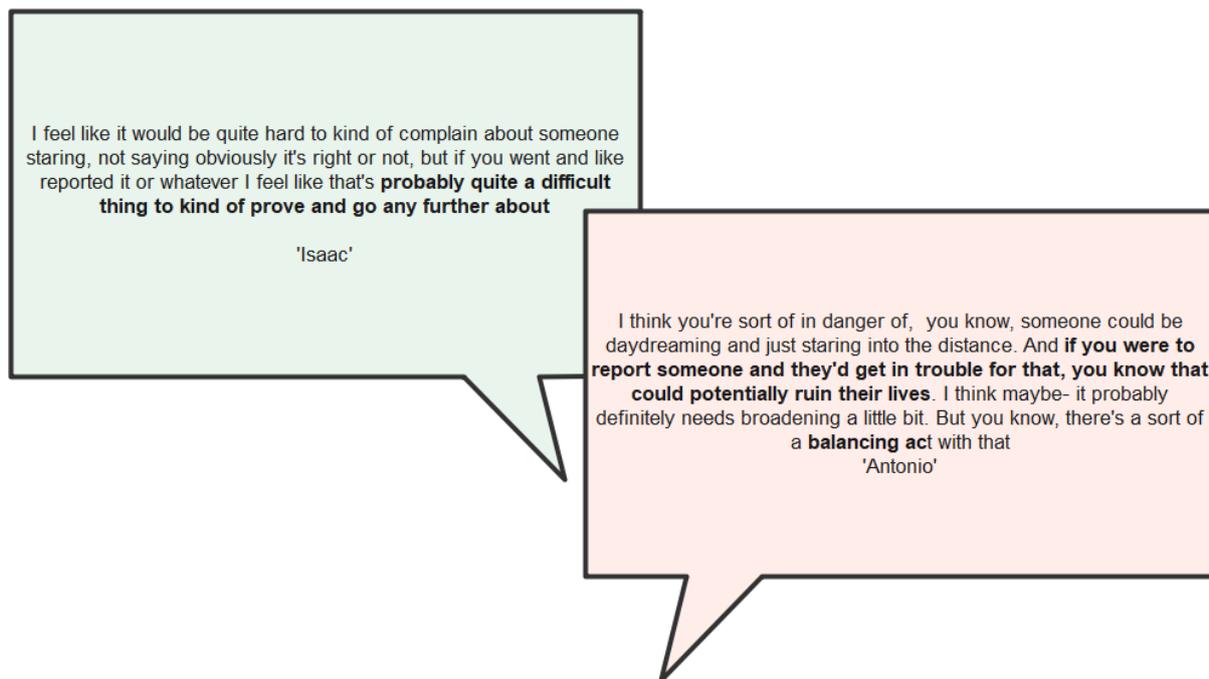


Figure 28: Excerpt from discussion group: 2

2.3.3 Witnessing Sexual Harassment and challenging perpetration

A number of participants spoke about their experiences of witnessing SH and, in many cases, intervening, challenging or rejecting inappropriate or unwanted behaviour. Interviewee 'Sofia' spoke about one occasion when she had intervened by approaching the woman who was being harassed:

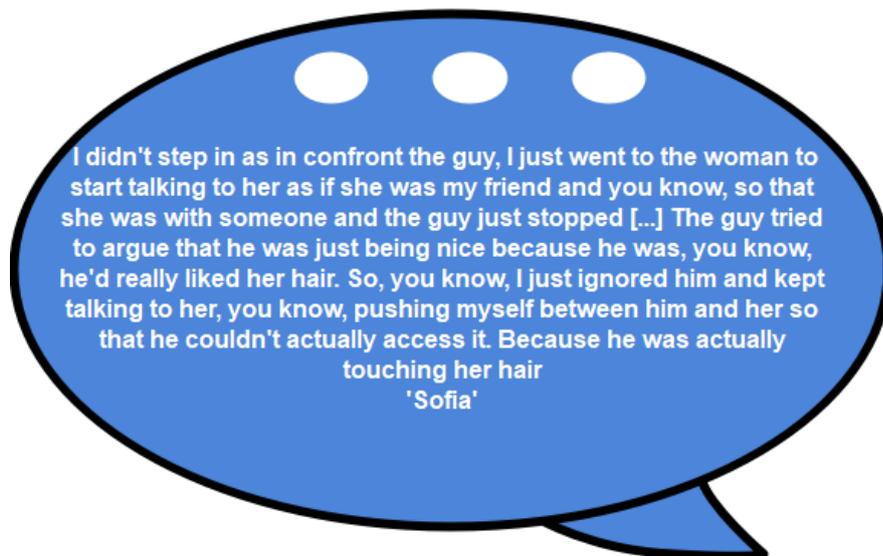


Figure 29: Excerpt from interview with 'Sofia'

Along similar lines, several male discussion group participants described intervening by pretending to be someone's friend or boyfriend:

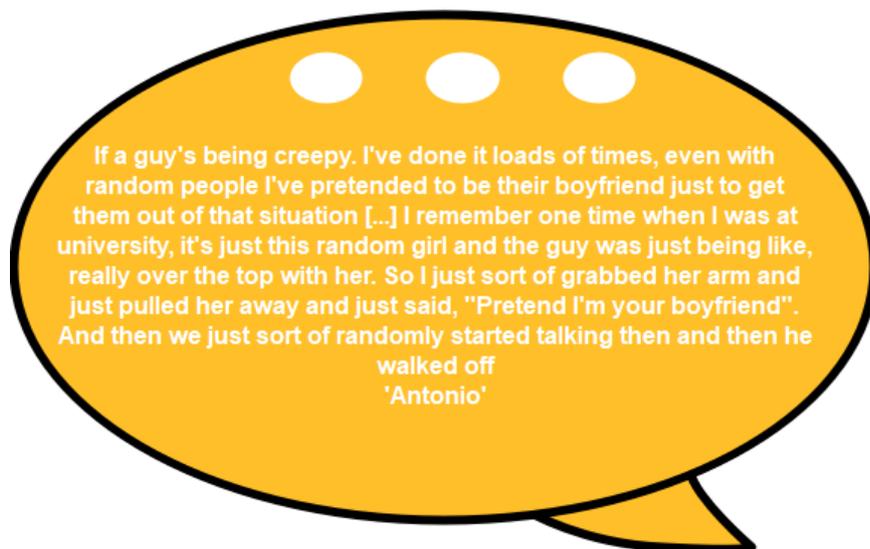


Figure 30: Excerpt from discussion group: 3

Both approaches were informal but successful; while neither participant described reporting the incident to police or other 'official' agencies, they were able to effectively disrupt and de-escalate the situation, preventing further harm to the victim. Notably, the perpetrator in these instances was a stranger rather than a friend, acquaintance or colleague, and both participants felt that it was safe to intervene.

Another discussion group participant, 'Brian', recalled feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the developing group dynamic at a stag do. Brian tried to challenge the other men present on their behaviours, which included "going up to [women], and,

you know, maybe putting their arm around them and try to give them a kiss, that sort of stuff”. However, his attempt to “say something” about other attendees’ behaviour was met with laughter, and in the end he decided to remove himself from the situation by leaving early.

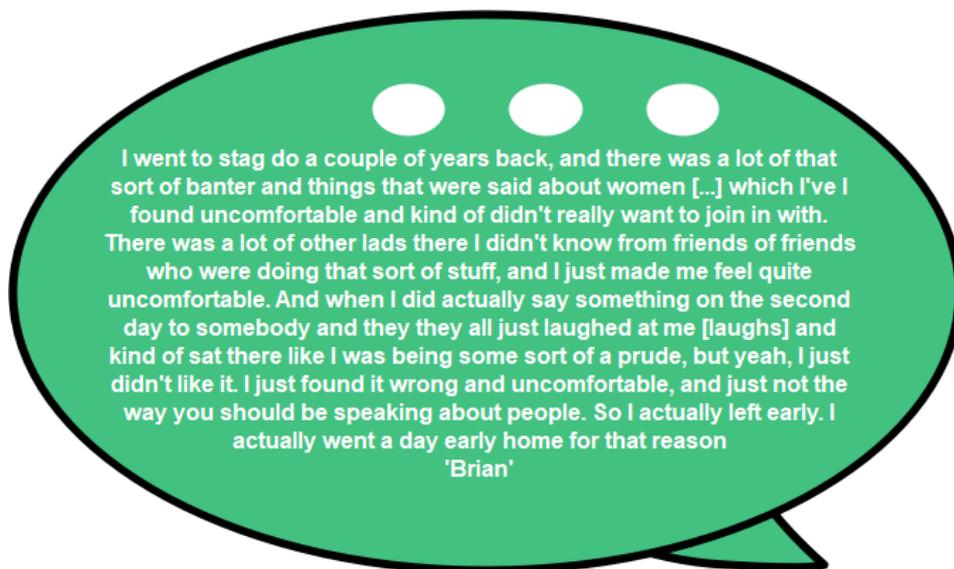


Figure 31: Excerpt from discussion group: 4

Participants discussed observing behaviours they did not perceive as SH at the time, but which they have since reflected may have constituted harassment.

‘Callum’ recalled witnessing an interaction in a professional context which was treated as a “big joke” by everyone present:

It's really difficult because there's so many different types of sexual harassment from quite sort of minor offences to something quite major. I've worked in the theatre a lot, and I remember I was doing a show a number of years ago. And the star of the show is quite well known. And during rehearsals he went up to a woman and said 'I'll give you 50 pence if I can't make your breasts move'. And she said, 'Okay, how d'you do it?' that sort of thing. And then he went ahead and touched her on her breasts, and **everyone laughed**, and he said 'Worth the 50 pence'. And everyone laughed. And it was a **big joke**, but I thought about it since and thought. Was that sexual harassment? I mean, she might- she was laughing at the joke, but, um...**maybe it is sexual harassment even if you did find it funny?** Do you know what I mean? It sort of...is it dependent on a person who is being harassed as to whether it's sexual harassment or not? **Is that acceptable behaviour even in a group of people?**
'Callum'

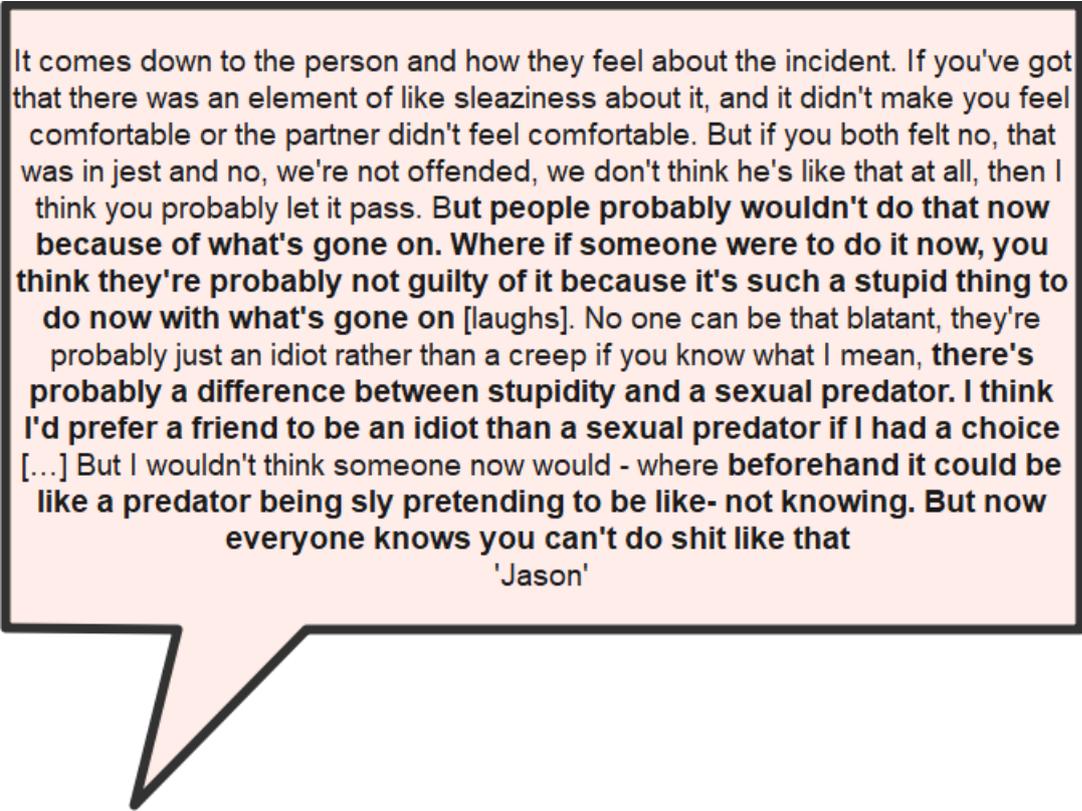
Figure 32: Excerpt from discussion group: 5

'Brian' described a similar interaction between his partner and a male friend:

Yeah, that actually happened to my partner, one of my best friends came to stay with us, and he had a similar sort of joke. And it was. 'Have you ever had your boobs weighed?' And then he grabs a boob and goes 'wahey'. I'm doing it straight, which isn't very funny. But she laughed and like, is that, you know, me and her both laughed and it was like a silly joke and whatever. Wasn't particularly offended by it, but is that sexual harassment? I don't know, it's inappropriate, definitely. **But I don't know if it's sexual harassment, cos he was doing it as a joke. He knows us really well, and he's a close friend of hers.** So I don't- I don't know whether I'd call it harassment or just inappropriate. **It's definitely inappropriate, but probably not harassment.** And she laughed and she took it, took it well, but dunno. I didn't think about at the time. I just thought it was funny, but thinking about it now, I never really spoke to her about afterwards, it might have upset her. I don't know.
'Brian'

Figure 33: Excerpt from discussion group: 6

These experiences underline why it may prove difficult for individuals to identify, and challenge, SH when it occurs in plain sight in social and professional contexts. If everyone present sees and laughs, it doesn't resemble the furtive, "sleazy" and obviously predatory behavioural patterns that many associate with SH. Another participant in the discussion group, 'Jason' argued that, almost by definition, these kind of "blatant" instances of uninvited touching probably aren't sexually motivated or part of a wider pattern of behaviour that should arouse concern, particularly in the wake of increased awareness of SH in the post-Me-Too landscape:



It comes down to the person and how they feel about the incident. If you've got that there was an element of like sleaziness about it, and it didn't make you feel comfortable or the partner didn't feel comfortable. But if you both felt no, that was in jest and no, we're not offended, we don't think he's like that at all, then I think you probably let it pass. **But people probably wouldn't do that now because of what's gone on. Where if someone were to do it now, you think they're probably not guilty of it because it's such a stupid thing to do now with what's gone on [laughs].** No one can be that blatant, they're probably just an idiot rather than a creep if you know what I mean, **there's probably a difference between stupidity and a sexual predator. I think I'd prefer a friend to be an idiot than a sexual predator if I had a choice [...]** But I wouldn't think someone now would - where **beforehand it could be like a predator being sly pretending to be like- not knowing. But now everyone knows you can't do shit like that**
'Jason'

Figure 34: Excerpt from discussion group: 7

These accounts shed light on some of the contextual factors that may enable or inhibit successful bystander interventions (including reporting on behalf of the victim if they are unable to do so safely), and highlight key messages which could be used to counteract the social pressures and norms that can deter bystanders from intervening, or make it harder to do so effectively. In particular, the dichotomy between "predatory"

and merely “stupid” behaviour may point to the power of SH myths which position perpetrators as self-evidently deviant ‘Others’ – who, by implication, are unlikely to be among our friends or colleagues.

As these examples show, there are powerful social incentives not to object or ‘make a scene’ in response to potentially inappropriate behaviours, particularly when the recipient themselves is laughing along or seems outwardly unaffected. One counter-narrative which may go some way towards addressing this is developing a more nuanced understanding of trauma responses, as discussed in the next section.

2.3.4 Impacts of Sexual Harassment

As with the open-ended survey responses, fear and safety work featured prominently in several interviewees’ discussion of their experiences of SH, evoking a sense of threat and constraint. These findings broadly reflect the closed-ended survey responses regarding the emotional impacts of SH, which overwhelmingly featured negatively-valenced emotions such as anger, vulnerability, embarrassment, self-consciousness, fear and anxiety.

‘Ruth’ described a persistent feeling of unsafety:

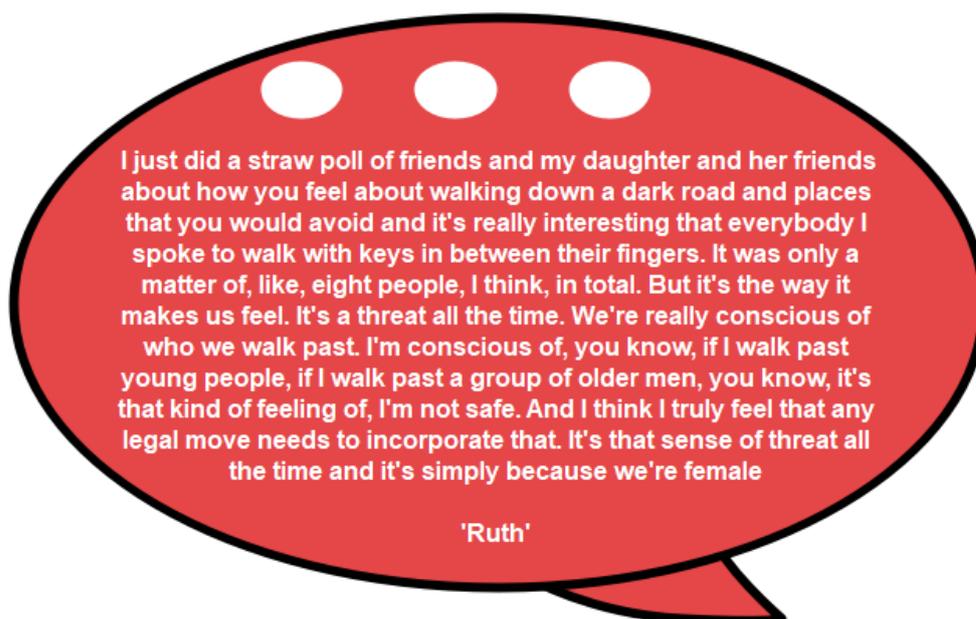


Figure 35: Excerpt from interview with 'Ruth'

Two interviewees, 'Melanie' and 'Andreas', observed that prior experiences of trauma – whether in relation to SH or other forms of victimisation – can amplify the impacts of behaviours that external observers may perceive as minor or even complimentary.

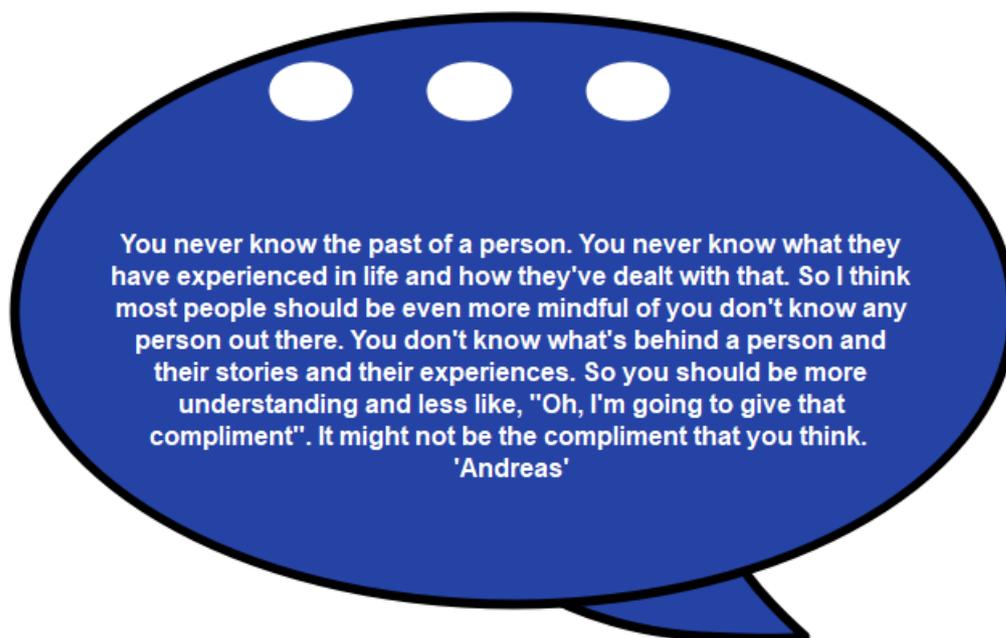


Figure 36: Excerpt from interview with 'Andreas' (2)

Melanie likened the cumulative effects of ongoing SH and psychological trauma to an “eggshell skull” that increases someone’s vulnerability to harm:

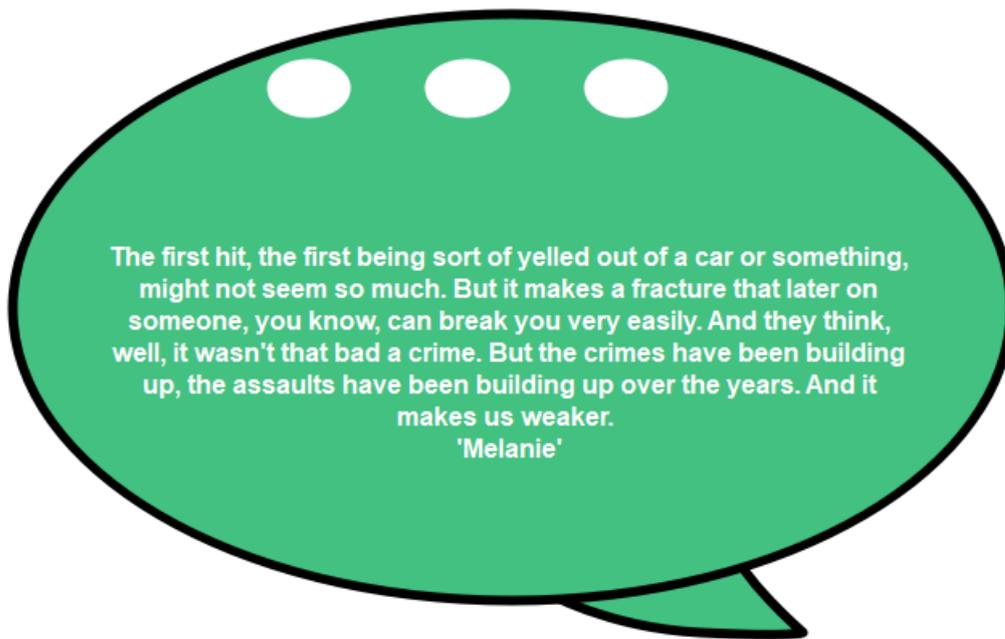


Figure 37: Excerpt from interview with 'Melanie' (1)

Equally, both interviewees pointed out that instinctive (but often misunderstood) threat responses such as freezing and fawning problematise common sense assumptions about how people will respond to unwanted or intimidating sexual behaviours and may contribute to disbelief or victim-blaming after the fact if victims are not able to defend their boundaries as vociferously as expected. As discussed in the previous section, it is plausible that such beliefs may also deter bystanders from intervening; if as a society we have a fixed idea of how a victim behaves, we will be liable to miss victims who are 'not waving but drowning'. This is particularly damaging as the wider literature on sexual victimisation indicates that a "relatively high percentage of rape victims feel paralyzed and unable to act" (Schmidt *et al*, 2008: 2).

Andreas spoke about his experience of SH from an unexpected assailant, and how shock "froze" him in place:

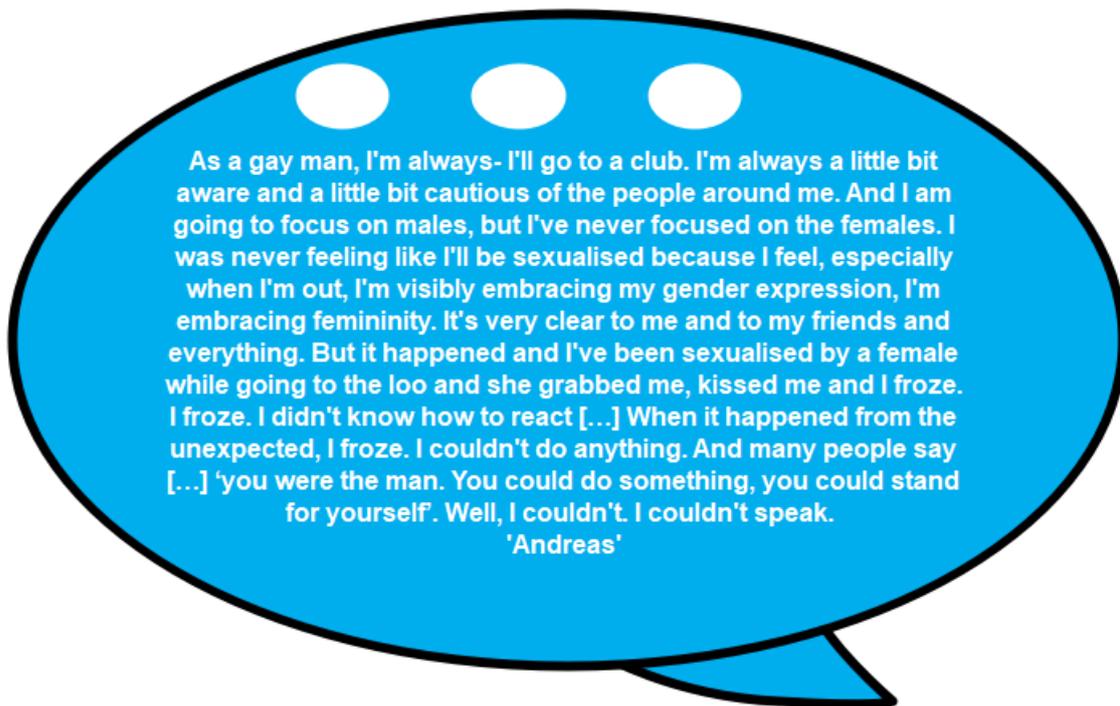


Figure 38: Excerpt from interview with 'Andreas' (3)

Melanie spoke about her awareness that the adaptive behaviours she acquired to navigate earlier experiences of victimisation may be misinterpreted by criminal justice 'gatekeepers' if she were to report future incidents:

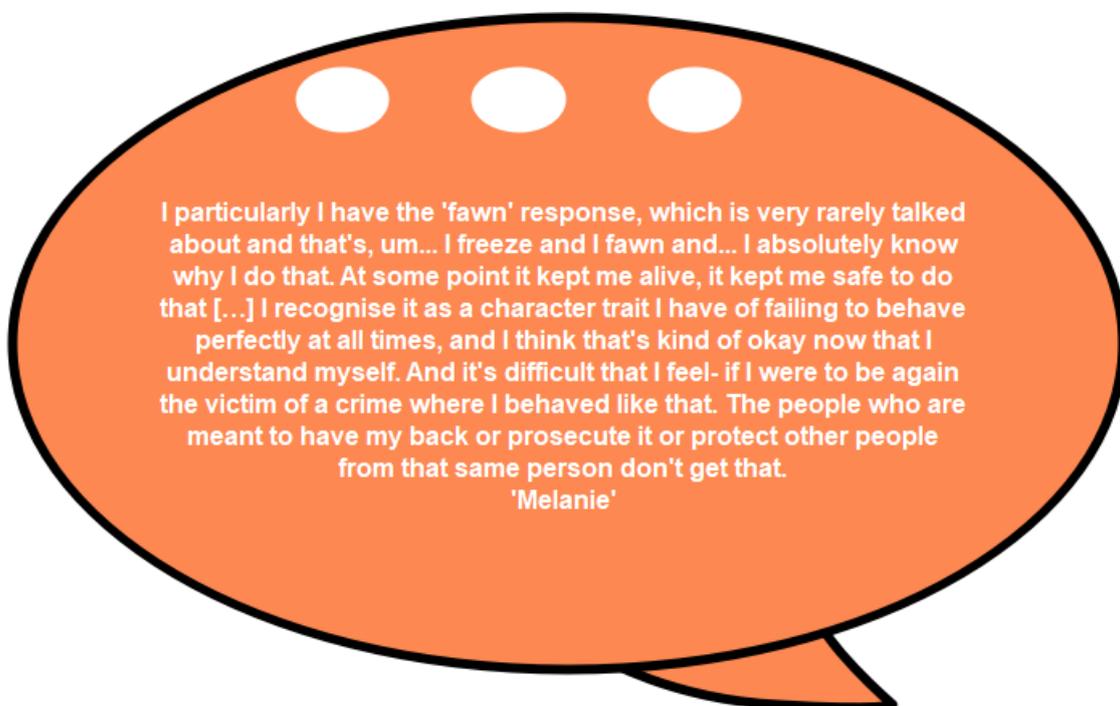


Figure 39: Excerpt from interview with 'Melanie' (2)

This suggests that individuals who have already been subjected to SH or other forms of abuse and are engaged in continuing reparative “violence work” (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020) may be more, or differently, susceptible to the harmful impacts of SH than others.

2.3.4 Cultural & contextual norms

As discussed in section 2.2.4, cultural norms were identified by some research participants as one of the factors informing how SH is defined, understood and responded to

One interviewee, ‘Akeem’ felt that wider societal stereotyping of LGBTQ+ people (and particularly gay men) as “promiscuous and more open to certain types of behaviour” could feed into “toxic behaviour around sexuality” in some community environments, particularly when combined with the use of drugs and alcohol:

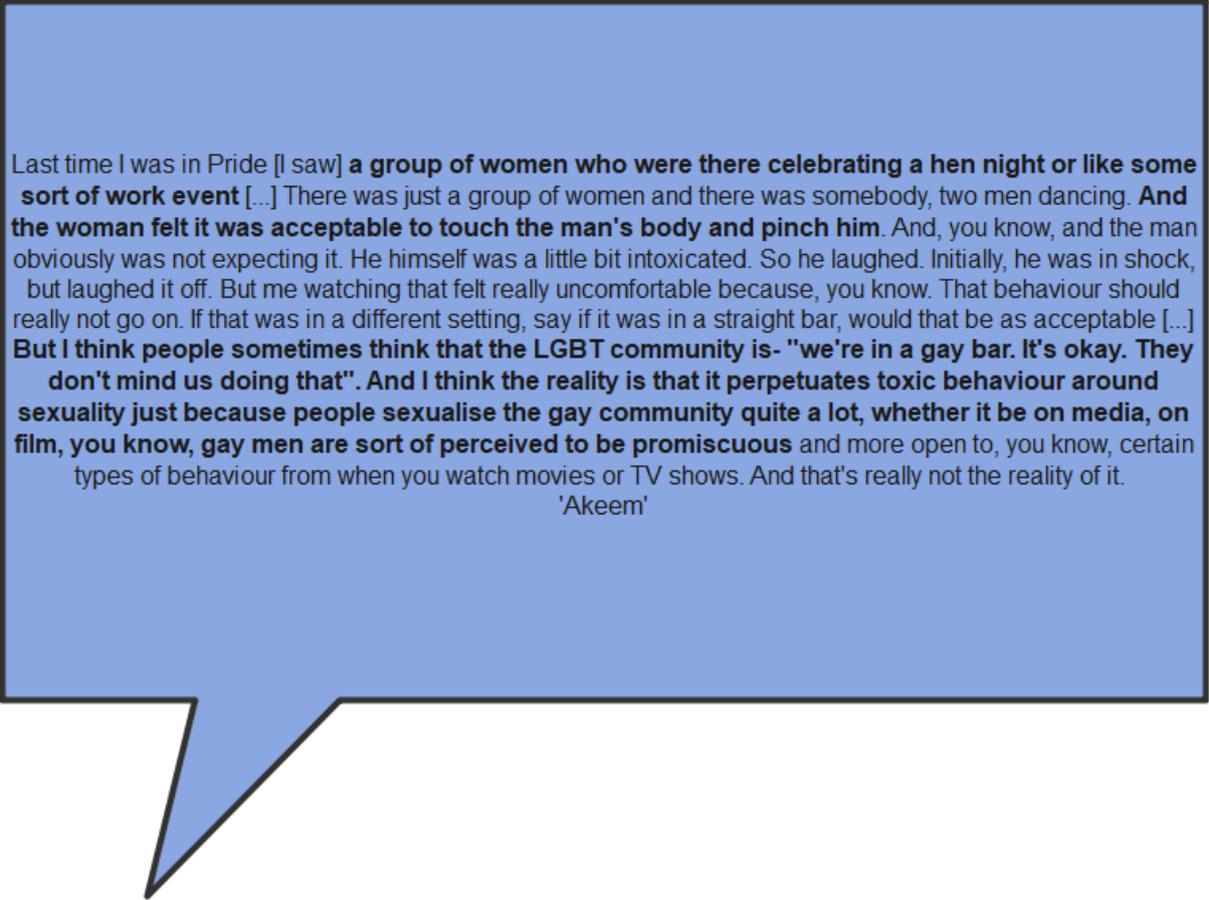
I find that within the gay community, you know, it's quite acceptable for someone if you are in certain places for someone to physically grope you and you know, and be really, er- and sexually harass people, especially at events that I've turned up to say, for example, pride events, when people have had a mix of drugs and alcohol, it definitely isn't a good combination. I personally, because of my religious reasons, I don't drink. Um, so when I am in these places I find myself, you know, questioning behaviours because I'm still not intoxicated and I can recognise what behaviour I think is not acceptable. And that has sometimes led me to trouble because I've said to someone that "that's probably not a good idea to do that. That's not, you know, you have to be mindful of someone's space". And I **think it's something that isn't really talked about very much within the LGBT community. I think it's something that needs to be addressed, um, because it's for a lot of people, it's just not a safe place.** Add to that, the lack of LGBT education in schools means that **younger people who first go into the LGBT scene might deem it acceptable [...]**

And that's why I think, you know, once again, going back to raising awareness.

'Akeem'

Figure 40: Excerpt from interview with ‘Akeem’ (1)

In some instances, Akeem felt that this stereotyping contributed to SH against gay men perpetrated by heterosexual 'visitors' to LGBTQ+ spaces:



Last time I was in Pride [I saw] **a group of women who were there celebrating a hen night or like some sort of work event** [...] There was just a group of women and there was somebody, two men dancing. **And the woman felt it was acceptable to touch the man's body and pinch him.** And, you know, and the man obviously was not expecting it. He himself was a little bit intoxicated. So he laughed. Initially, he was in shock, but laughed it off. But me watching that felt really uncomfortable because, you know. That behaviour should really not go on. If that was in a different setting, say if it was in a straight bar, would that be as acceptable [...] **But I think people sometimes think that the LGBT community is- "we're in a gay bar. It's okay. They don't mind us doing that". And I think the reality is that it perpetuates toxic behaviour around sexuality just because people sexualise the gay community quite a lot, whether it be on media, on film, you know, gay men are sort of perceived to be promiscuous** and more open to, you know, certain types of behaviour from when you watch movies or TV shows. And that's really not the reality of it.

'Akeem'

Figure 41: Excerpt from interview with 'Akeem' (2)

Equally, Akeem noted that varying religious and cultural norms can shape people's ability to speak about and report SH:

I think for me, when I did this, the questionnaire, one of the things that I wanted to highlight was around the fact that because of my cultural background and religious background, I've been a victim of sexual harassment before [...]

One of the barriers for me reporting it was because I'm not out to my family and the community that I live in [...] I worry about the police turning up at my door or at my work place questioning me and, you know, and just yeah. So that's one of the reasons I think has stopped me from reporting these crimes. [...]

And just from sort of my own community [...] **I've got sisters and I know that they've been victims of sexual harassment, but they haven't reported it because of the stigma [...]** I remember witnessing someone sexually harassing my sister, but at the time she turned around and said, "**Look, I don't want to report this because, you know, it will come back to me as a female**". And I thought, you know, that's horrible to think like that. You know, just because you had nothing to do with this, you know, that this is just some random person on the street who feels entitled to behave a certain way when they shouldn't. But it did get me thinking how difficult it is, especially for women in the community that I grew up in, Muslim women in the community, because they don't tend to report these issues, especially if it was, say, for example, someone within the internal community [...]

So I think that's another barrier, but I don't know how to put that into words. Yeah. **Community and cultural environments where people don't feel that it's safe to be open about sexual harassment.**

'Akeem'

Figure 42: Excerpt from interview with 'Akeem' (3)

Meanwhile, 'Alice' described a pervasive normalisation of SH in school contexts, with a lack of reporting by students and a lack of intervention or preventive action by adults:

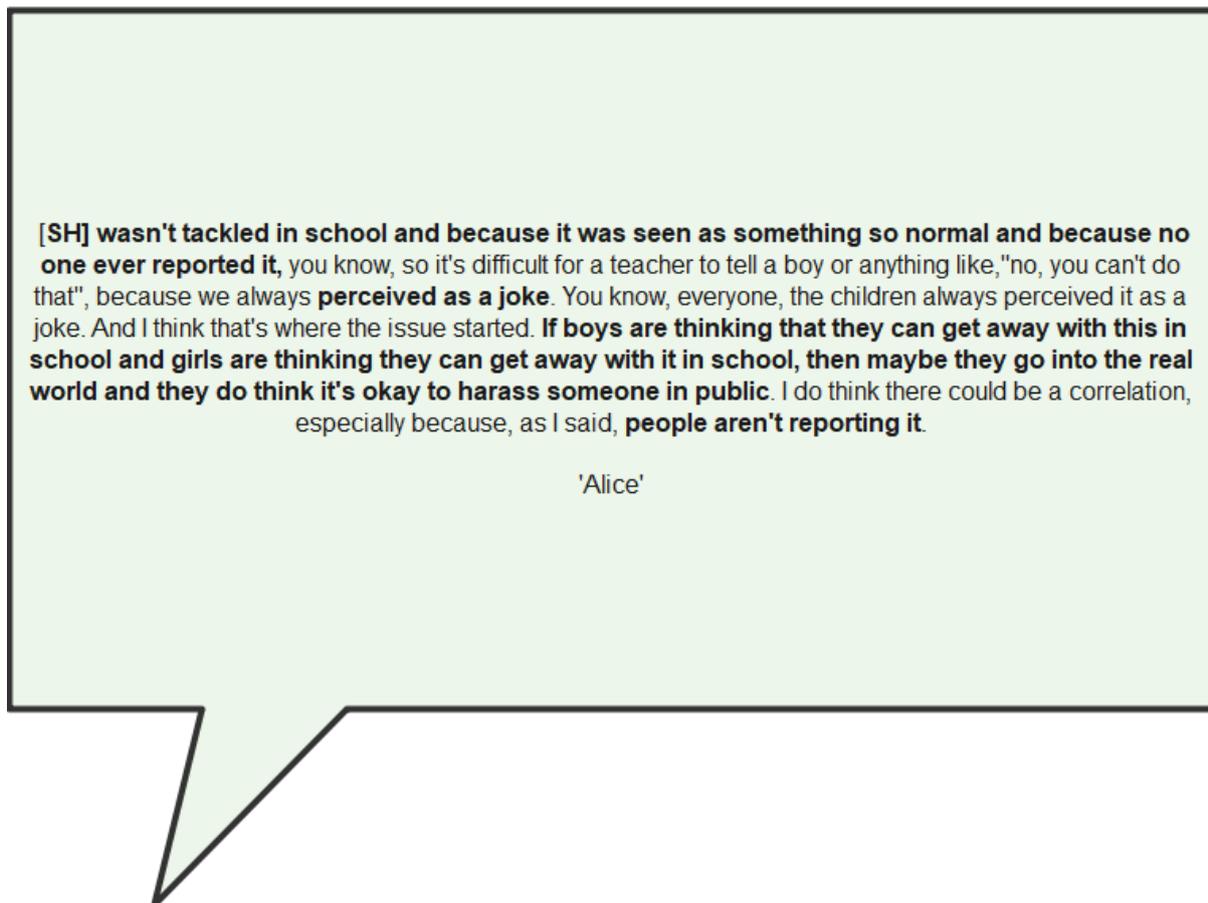


Figure 43: Excerpt from interview with 'Alice'

The wider literature on sexual violence in public spaces indicates that social norms which contribute to a sense of stigma or victim-blaming– or a sense of impunity for perpetrators – create a 'conducive context' for SH (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020) and deter reporting. Cultural gender norms which prize female chastity, and position women as sexual 'gatekeepers', suppress reporting because experiencing SH can be viewed as blameworthy, evidence of a lapse in vigilance or propriety. Notably, the gender norms which discourage reporting are not confined to religious communities; historically, messaging around SH and other forms of gendered violence has overwhelmingly blamed women and girls for not preventing their victimisation (Burt, 1980, Gavey, 2018; Vera-Gray, 2018)

In line with our qualitative findings, this wider body of research also points to a pervasive normalisation and toleration of SH in public spaces, particularly in environments which are perceived as sexually permissive and/or anonymous, such as in night-time economy and public transport settings (Quigg et al, 2021; Quigg & Bigland, 2020; Lewis et al, 2019; Brooks, 2014).

Concerningly, as Alice's experiences attest, educational settings such as schools, colleges and universities have been identified as another conducive context for SH.

2.3.5 Key findings

These findings regarding the qualitative survey, interview and discussion group data suggest several key friction points which the campaign will need to address when seeking to challenge the prevalence and normalisation of SH:

- Concerns about the ambiguity of behaviours along the 'milder' end of the SH spectrum, such as staring
- Beliefs that non-contact SH is non- or only minimally- harmful
- Stereotypes regarding how a real victim or real perpetrator acts, which may deter reporting or other forms of bystander intervention
- Stereotypes which characterise perpetrators as 'Other', or position SH as a problem limited to certain groups
- Social incentives to minimise uncertain or borderline instances of SH to avoid making a scene or being seen as humourless

Messaging to counter these points could involve:

- Emphasising the fear of escalation: a wolf whistle is only 'just' a whistle in hindsight
- Explore the unpredictable and cumulative impacts of apparently minor incidents
- Dispelling myths about how people react to SH, and providing a more trauma-informed view
- Portray a range of perpetrators, and attend to/debunk prevalent myths and stereotypes
- Providing a roadmap for effective bystander interventions based on available literature (see Fenton & Mott, 2018)

2.4 Themes

In addition to the findings regarding interviewee and discussion group participants' definitions of SH and their experiences as victims and bystanders, researchers identified several themes regarding the wider cultural milieu in which SH takes place and relevant theoretical frameworks.

2.4.1 Culture of Entitlement

Several female interviewees spoke of a culture of male entitlement, which contributed to a sense of impunity among men engaged in SH. Street-based SH was characterised as a prime example of this entitlement, with responses from female participants illustrating how sexual harassment was viewed as pervasive and everyday. Their accounts underline that SH is not confined to a single setting or space, and that women and girls experience harassing behaviours, invasion of privacy and assaults in a wide range of settings. Male participants offered a wide range of responses, many of which were reflecting on their peers' behaviours and wider discussions around misogyny and wider societal attitudes.

Ruth also talked about a need for a focus on “language used...and there needs to be a recognition of how somebody close to you can feel unsafe, even at work. And there needs to be a conversation about that entitlement that men seem to have”. Sofia talked in similar terms, in fact using the exact same word of entitlement:

I think sexual harassment is part of the more general sense of entitlement that some people feel. And for them it's normal, because...they think they have the right to treat people however they want to treat people. Because the important thing is that they're not inconvenienced in any way whatsoever...women on the entitlement scale are massively under-represented, I would say. I cannot think of one instance from hundreds where the woman was the perpetrator

Further, Sofia said that “it is difficult to talk about generalities...more widely I think I’m quite hopeful that younger generations are probably more vocal about (it)...less willing to shut up and take it” going on to say that “people now talk about it”.

Entitlement was seen, by many participants, as being intrinsically tied to a culture of impunity: men who felt they were able to commodify the bodies and existence of women for their own sexual gratification and/or to demean women in public spaces. Invasion of a woman’s personal space, for example, was seen as evidence of a general culture of a lack of respect towards women, and this was something referenced and alluded to by several participants.

2.4.2 Situational Action Theory

The topic of SH in relation to space was one that was referenced by almost all participants, irrespective of gender and across different methods of data collection (e.g. one-on-one depth interviews or focus groups.). This is unsurprising considering that SH, and crime more generally, is conditioned and shaped by the environment, subcultural norms and peer group associations. Ruth, for example, detailed how “Touch can be, you know, nightclubs, pubs, buses, anywhere that's kind of, you know, close to other people, that kind of thing”. Ruth went on to discuss how harassing behaviours can be amplified in group settings – something that was also elaborated on by male participants, both relating to incidents they witnessed and their peer-groups' behaviours.

These accounts correspond to Situational Action Theory (SAT), which explains lawbreaking behaviours as occurring through an interaction between an individual and their surrounding environment (Wikstrom 2012). SAT posits that it is neither solely the individual (e.g., innate characteristics/psychological factors) nor solely one’s surroundings (i.e., environmental factors) which lead to the commission of crimes, but rather, a combination of the two (ibid). Many participants’ responses aligned very closely with SAT, in particular those who discussed varying attitudes towards SH and how attitudinal differences between and within communities may affect prevalence and responses.

Participants drew attention to the different environments where they had experienced SH, and how environmental factors can constrain and condition SH. For example, Ruth stated “I’ve had it happen in workplace, places I volunteer”, while Sofia stated that the Covid-19 pandemic meant men could not harass her “because I’m not going anywhere”. More broadly, a range of participants (both men and women) spoke of how the circumstances of surroundings affected their experiences of SH. Clubs, bars, schools and other densely populated areas such as public transport were particularly associated with the occurrence and toleration of SH, as were milieus in which misogyny is encouraged, accepted or especially close to the surface.

2.4.3 Times are changing

Recent events such as the #Me Too movement and widespread public outcry following the murder of Sarah Everard in 2021 underscore shifting societal attitudes regarding gendered violence. Akeem, for example, stated that people are now “calling it [SH] out more”. He went on to say that “People just didn't have the tools to be able to say "Well, that's sexual harassment right there" and calling it out the way we can do now, thanks to, you know, one of the perks of having social media and access to information so quickly, we can say well, actually, that wasn't someone just being rude to me. That was sexual harassment. That's, you know, being able to. Also provide evidence of what they've experienced”. Sofia expressed similar sentiments, stating that “the younger generation are more prepared to call it [SH] out”. Providing a comprehensive and detailed account of how this intergenerational change was occurring, Sofia summarised the situation in the following terms:

*I think what has changed is that now people actually talk about it when whereas before they didn't. I'm quite hopeful because I think younger generations are...
Probably more vocal about it, like older generations should be right.*

There was also broad (although by no means unanimous) agreement that verbal harassment constituted SH. Sofia, for example, recounted how words “**can actually be quite heavy sometimes**” adding “so one thing I think that verbal harassment is

actually more insidious than physical harassment. Because physical harassment is quite clear: you touch me”.

Conversely, and perhaps representing somewhat of an ‘outlier’, participants in one male-only focus group were hesitant to refer to all forms of verbal behaviours as SH, perhaps reflecting their ages, and in contrast to younger males in another focus group, who shared Akeem and Sofia’s perspective.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

In line with the wider evidence base on SH and other forms of sexual violence, our survey findings suggest that most women and girls across the UK will experience uninvited, intrusive and unwanted sexual behaviours at some point in their lifetimes, and that these experiences may significantly impact their ability to feel safe in public spaces.

Our survey and interview findings also vividly demonstrate the wide-ranging emotional and behavioural impacts of SH in public spaces, and how each instance of unwanted behaviour or attention can collectively contribute to a sense of certain spaces or environments as hostile or ‘off limits’ to women and girls. Given that transport, leisure, commercial and educational settings were commonly represented among locations where participants had encountered SH, it is particularly concerning that around one in ten survey participants (9.8%) reported avoiding places where they had previously experienced unwanted behaviours (see Figure 19). Almost one in six (14.6%) reported avoiding isolated areas, while one in eight (12.2%) avoided going out late or after dark. This foreclosure of public spaces, and frustration of routine freedoms, should be communicated when discussing the harms of SH, which extend far beyond the moment of the behaviour, or its immediate emotional effects.

In relation to understanding perpetration, while none of our interview or discussion group participants disclosed perpetrating SH in public spaces, several had witnessed actions by friends, acquaintances or colleagues that could meet the criteria of SH but which they had not viewed as such at the time. Participants’ evolving interpretations of these actions - and the differing explanatory frameworks employed to make sense

of them – suggest that preconceptions about victim and perpetrator behaviour analogous to the ‘real rape’ stereotype may impede bystanders’ ability to recognise and effectively respond to SH in the moment (Estrich, 1987). Co-produced materials that draw on the experiences of victims of SH may encourage more accurate perspective-taking – enabling those with little prior knowledge or experience of sexual victimisation to understand why victims may not respond in ‘reasonable’ or common-sense ways. Messaging which humanises those who perpetrate SH without minimising the harmfulness of their actions could also aid audience members in responding to SH perpetrated by people they know, by reducing the salience of the “sleazy” sexual predator archetype.

Overall, analysis of the definitions employed by male and female participants did not support there being a major gender difference in understandings of SH; however, male discussion group participants voiced more concerns about the prospect of ‘false positives’ and enforcement, particularly in relation to more intangible forms of SH such as staring. Male participants also expressed greater uncertainty about the subjective and contextually-variable nature of SH. These concerns should not be taken lightly and future research into these areas of discussion are required. Moreover, these concerns may pose a barrier to increased reporting to official agencies, with the perception that a false or erroneous report could be life-ruining. An emphasis on anonymous channels for reporting such as CS may counteract some of these anxieties (e.g. a fear of negative social repercussions for making the wrong judgement call), but are unlikely to entirely alleviate them. An emphasis on the role of reporting in preventing and disrupting further harm, rather than in meting out punishment may be beneficial, although it should also be borne in mind that some victims may favour more ‘punitive’ responses.

4. Key messages for future campaigns

- SH is harmful both because of the immediacy of its emotional impacts - which our survey found to be overwhelmingly negative - and the longer-term psychological effects on women and girls, such as on their sense of safety, self, personhood and freedom

- Unwanted behaviours that the perpetrator or a bystander may perceive as relatively minor can have significant and lasting impacts on the recipient, including verbal harassment.
- The fear of escalation, and the lingering impacts of previous instances of victimisation, mean that a whistle is not just a whistle; there is no common sense or 'reasonable person' standpoint from which 'less' invasive acts of SH can be dismissed as minor, because these acts occur in a wider cultural, social and psychological context
- People react to SH in a variety of ways, and 'freezing or fawning' represent common responses to threats. Just because someone experiencing uninvited or inappropriate behaviours isn't displaying a negative emotional response instantaneously doesn't mean they welcome the behaviours or are unaffected by them
- Similarly, those who perpetrate SH may not conform to stereotypes of the furtive, obviously deviant or sleazy 'other'
- Intervening when you believe someone may be engaging in SH does not need to involve confrontation or put the bystander at risk of reprisals; it can mean safely/anonymously reporting to CS or police, or engaging in evidence-informed techniques developed for disrupting SV and other forms of gendered violence such as the five 'Ds' (four of which are non-confrontational by design) (Casper et al, 2022; Fenton & Mott, 2018)

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Technical Appendix

Impact of Unwanted Sexual Behaviours on Respondents

Table 1 Respondents' changed behaviours due to unwanted behaviour

Changed Behaviour	% Reported	N
I have never changed my behaviour	1.8%	67
Carried items for self defense	9.8%	361
Asked someone to accompany me	11.1%	411
Avoided isolated areas	14.6%	537
Avoided places where I have been harassed before	9.8%	362
Avoided going out late or in dark	12.2%	450
Avoided public transport at certain times	9.0%	333
Avoided public transport altogether	3.4%	126
Avoided cycling/walking, or changed route	8.7%	320
Changed work/study times	3.2%	118
Stopped pursuing a hobby	3.8%	142
Changed style or dress	8.4%	309
Avoided showing affection to partner	2.0%	72
Prefer not to say	0.1%	2
Other	2.2%	80

Table 1: Respondents' changed behaviours due to unwanted behaviour

Table 1 shows that respondents' most changed behaviours are avoiding isolated areas (14.6%), avoiding going out late or in the dark (12.2%), and asking someone to accompany them (11.1%).

Table 2

How respondent felt as a result of the unwanted behaviour

Feeling/emotion	Reported %	N
Angry	10.3%	441
Upset	8.4%	359
Frightened	8.2%	351
Happy	0.0%	2
Insulted	5.1%	221
Flattered	0.9%	38
Amused	1.0%	44

Feeling/emotion	Reported %	N
Bored	0.6%	26
Disgusted	6.7%	289
Shocked	6.0%	256
Surprised	3.8%	163
Embarrassed	6.8%	290
Anxious	7.7%	331
Depressed	2.3%	100
Vulnerable	9.5%	406
Dirty	3.3%	141
Self-Conscious	7.5%	323
Small	2.3%	98
Desired	0.4%	16
Attractive	0.4%	19
Objectified	6.1%	261
Unattractive	0.9%	40
None of the above	0.1%	3

Table 2: *How respondent felt as a result of the unwanted behaviour*

Table 2 shows that the highest reported feeling was anger (10.3%), followed by feeling upset and frightened at 8.4% and 8.2% respectively. Positive emotions associated with unwanted behaviours were amongst the least reported (happy at 0.0%, desired and attractive both at 0.4%).

Characteristics of unwanted sexual behaviour

Table 3

Respondent age at first experience of unwanted sexual behaviour

Age	% Reported	N
0-5 years	3.7	26
6-10 years	13.1	93
11-13 years	29.4	208
14-16 years	30.9	219
17-20 years	13.4	95
21+	7.8	55
Can't remember	1.6	11
Prefer not to say	.1	1

Table 3: *Respondent age at first experience of unwanted sexual behaviour*

The most frequent age at which unwanted sexual attention or behaviour happened was 14-16 years (30.9%), followed closely by 11-13 years (29.4%). See Fig. 44 for a bar chart.

Fig. 44

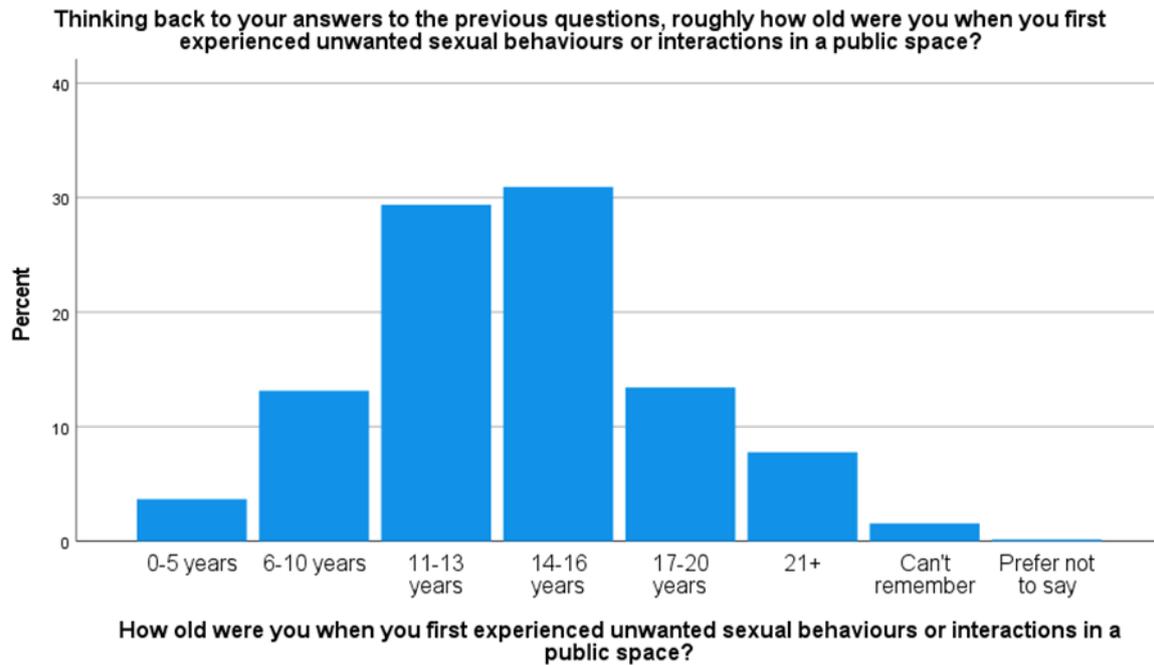


Figure 44: Bar chart illustrating age of first experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour

Table 4

Respondents' reporting of where unwanted behaviour happened most frequently

Where behaviour happened	% reported	N
I have never experienced unwanted behaviour in public	1.1%	46
On the High Street or Commercial area	11.9%	494
On a residential area	10.0%	415
An industrial area	2.8%	117
A rural area	3.5%	147
A shop	5.6%	233
A restaurant or cafe	4.1%	169
A pub	12.2%	507
A nightclub	11.2%	468
A cinema	1.4%	60
An overground train	6.2%	258
An underground train	6.1%	255
A bus	6.6%	273
A taxi, Uber, or equivalent	2.4%	99
In traffic on own transport	3.4%	141
At school, college, or university	6.2%	258
In a religious building or setting	0.8%	34
Other	4.6%	193

Table 4: Respondents' reporting of where unwanted behaviour happened most frequently

Most reported locations for unwanted experiences were a pub (12.2%), nightclub (11.2%), on the high street or other commercial area (11.9%), and in a residential area (10%).

Table 5

Frequency table for nature of the perpetrator

Who the perpetrator was	% Reported	N
A stranger	23.7%	639
An acquaintance	12.7%	342
A classmate	7.1%	192
A teacher or lecturer	1.9%	51
A colleague	10.9%	294
A work client or customer	6.3%	169
A friend	7.0%	189
A neighbour	3.4%	93
An ex-partner	6.8%	183
A partner	3.6%	97
A family member	3.3%	88
A public transport operator	3.5%	95
Retail or hospitality staff	2.5%	68
A security Guard	2.6%	69
Policing staff	1.6%	42
Religious Leader	0.7%	18
Social Worker	0.2%	6
Prefer not to say	0.2%	6
Other	2.2%	59

Table 5

As shown in Table 5, the most frequently reported type of perpetrator was stranger (23.7%). This was followed by acquaintance (12.7%), colleague (10.9%), classmate (7.1%), and friend (7.0%). The least reported type of perpetrator was social worker, at 0.2%

Table 6: Side-by-Side comparisons of unwanted experiences where perp was Male, Female, Non-Binary/Agender, or a Mixed-Gender group

Behaviour	% All the time				% Often				% Sometimes				% Rarely				% Never experienced				
	<i>Gender</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>MG</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>MG</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>MG</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>MG</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>MG</i>
Staring		9.72	.51	0.00	0.00	40.69	2.76	1.02	2.84	30.55	19.37	4.09	15.61	10.83	33.21	13.11	29.41	8.19	44.11	81.76	52.13
Following		.69	.35	0.00	.21	13.00	0.00	0.00	.62	34.82	2.49	1.05	2.51	31.60	14.79	4.62	11.95	19.86	82.35	94.32	84.69
Standing too close		6.41	.71	0.00	.42	33.33	2.68	.63	2.10	36.68	13.62	2.74	10.10	14.08	26.52	11.20	18.94	9.48	56.45	85.41	68.42
Comments on appearance		9.11	1.97	0.00	0.00	32.81	7.16	1.06	2.53	35.90	23.29	4.45	12.89	13.74	27.24	10.61	20.08	8.41	40.32	83.86	64.48
Unwanted kissing		.56	.18	0.00	0.00	6.72	.54	0.00	.21	25.07	2.70	.63	2.75	37.53	16.03	3.83	8.26	30.11	80.54	95.53	88.77
Comments on Ethnicity		.84	.54	.21	.21	4.63	.54	0.00	.21	8.42	1.80	1.49	2.12	15.30	4.50	1.49	5.30	70.78	92.61	96.80	92.14
Comments on Sexuality		2.82	.18	0.00	0.00	10.18	1.80	1.06	1.70	22.20	6.51	.85	5.53	22.91	16.27	4.69	11.27	41.86	75.22	93.39	81.48
Comments on Disability		.29	.18	0.00	0.00	1.30	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.47	1.67	.21	.87	3.77	1.85	.43	1.96	92.15	96.28	99.34	97.15
Comments on Gender Identity		2.45	.18	.21	0.00	6.34	.36	.21	.43	13.11	5.35	.87	3.93	13.25	8.11	1.74	5.90	64.84	85.97	96.95	87.71

Behaviour	% All the time				% Often				% Sometimes				% Rarely				% Never experienced				
	Gender	M	F	NB	MG	M	F	NB	MG	M	F	NB	MG	M	F	NB	MG	M	F	NB	MG
Comments on Sex Life		8.38	1.08	0.00	.21	22.06	5.78	1.50	2.59	33.65	18.26	3.87	11.23	23.88	24.23	8.40	12.95	12.01	50.63	86.20	73.00
Unwanted Whistling		8.39	.18	0.00	0.00	26.85	.54	0.00	.64	37.34	2.90	.64	4.74	16.92	10.72	3.88	12.93	10.27	85.63	95.46	81.68
Flashing/Genital Exposure		.69	.18	0.00	0.00	2.65	.18	0.00	0.00	17.20	1.09	.64	1.29	34.26	4.56	3.88	3.88	45.17	93.97	98.70	94.81
Unwanted touching of clothes		1.69	.18	0.00	0.00	12.44	1.64	.43	.21	31.82	11.17	1.73	5.02	28.14	21.24	4.13	8.51	25.88	65.75	93.69	86.24
Unwanted touching of body		1.41	.18	0.00	0.00	12.83	.92	.21	.43	32.86	6.56	1.73	3.26	32.29	19.70	2.82	9.15	20.59	72.62	95.21	87.14
Taking pictures		.28	.36	0.00	0.00	2.70	.55	.21	0.00	13.22	2.02	0.00	1.96	29.87	9.94	2.82	7.42	53.91	87.10	97.38	90.61
Sending nudes/explicit images		3.66	.18	0.00	0.00	9.57	.54	.43	0.00	17.18	2.92	.43	1.09	18.02	4.93	1.96	2.62	51.54	91.40	97.16	96.28
Forcing V-S to touch them		1.26	.18	0.00	0.00	5.47	.18	.21	0.00	21.20	2.01	.43	1.31	30.75	9.32	1.08	4.81	41.29	88.30	98.26	93.87
Forcing V-S to have sex		1.27	.18	0.00	0.00	5.65	.18	.21	0.00	19.09	1.10	.21	1.09	29.56	7.33	.87	3.28	44.41	91.19	98.69	95.83
Sexual Assault		.84	.18	0.00	0.00	5.09	.36	.21	0.00	17.25	1.46	.21	.87	31.11	6.58	.86	3.28	45.68	91.40	98.70	95.83
Rape		.42	.18	0.00	0.00	1.98	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.53	.18	0.00	.66	17.18	2.21	.65	.66	73.86	97.41	99.34	98.67

Table 6: Side-by-Side comparisons of unwanted experiences by gender of perpetrator

Summary

Frequency analyses show that behaviours from men were by far the likeliest to be reported of all perpetrator genders. The highest reported behaviours from men were standing too close and unwanted staring, where only 3.7% and 8.19% (respectively) of respondents indicated they have never experienced this behaviour from men. Another highly reported behaviour was whistling, where just 10.27% of respondents indicated they had never experienced this behaviour from men. The lowest reported behaviour from men was comments on the respondent's disability – 92.15% of respondents indicated they had never experienced this behaviour. However, this was generally a very low-reported behaviour across gender.

Women perpetrators' behaviours were second most reported, however, reporting was still very low, with the highest reported behaviour being comments on appearance, in which 40.32% of respondents suggesting they had never experienced this behaviour. The lowest reported behaviour from women was rape, at 97.41% never experienced.

Mixed gender groups had a very low reporting rate. The highest reported behaviour from mixed-gender groups was staring, with 52.13% of respondents having never experienced this from this demographic. For most behaviours, over 90% reported never experienced, with the lowest reported behaviour being rape, with 98.15% of the sample having never experienced this behaviour from this demographic.

The demographic with the lowest reporting rate was Non-Binary or Agender perpetrators. Similarly to mixed-gender groups, most of the behaviours indicated an over 90% 'never experienced' report. The highest reported behaviour was staring – 81.76% reported they had never

experienced this behaviour from this group before. The lowest reported behaviour was rape – 98.66% of the sample indicated that they had no experience of this behaviour from Non-Binary or Agender perpetrators.

Overall, from this data it is indicated that unwanted behaviours from women, non-binary and agender, and mixed-gender perpetrators appear much less prevalent than those from men. Some behaviours seem uncommon across the board - for example rape or comments on the respondent's disability, and others are more common across the board, such as unwanted staring. Differences in perpetrator gender still exist in reporting in these behaviours, however.

